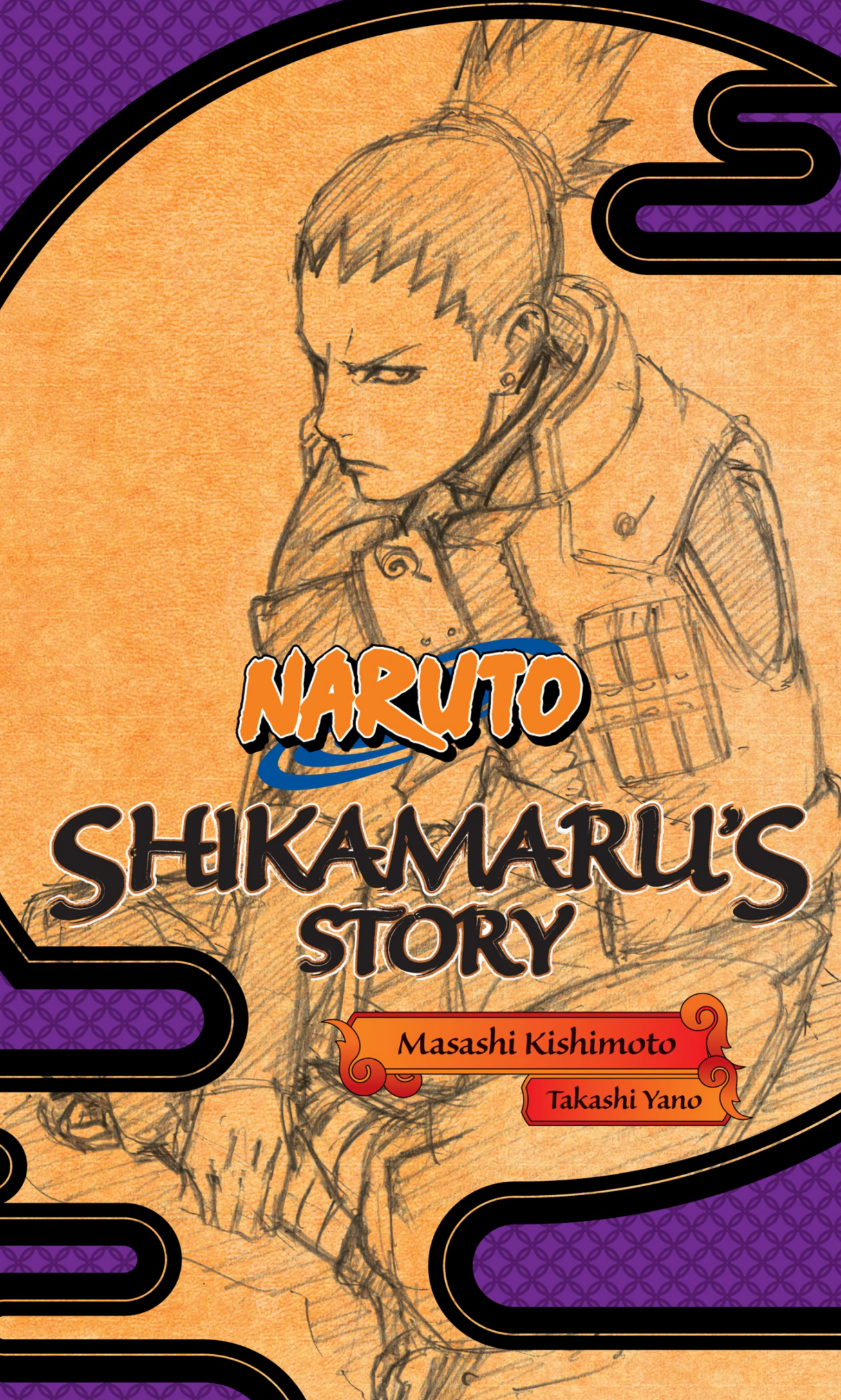


A detailed pencil sketch of Shikamaru Nara, a character from the anime Naruto. He is shown from the chest up, looking slightly to the left with a serious expression. He has his signature spiky hair and is wearing his standard Konoha uniform. The sketch is rendered in a loose, artistic style with visible pencil lines. The background of the sketch is a solid light orange color. The entire sketch is framed by a thick, black, stylized border that has a wavy, cloud-like shape on the right side.

NARUTO

SHIKAMARU'S

STORY

Masashi Kishimoto

Takashi Yano

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NARUTO SHIKAMARU-HIDEN YAMI NO SHIJIMA NI UKABU KUMO

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First published in Japan in 2015 by SHUEISHA Inc., Tokyo.

English translation rights arranged by SHUEISHA Inc.

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Published by

VIZ Media, LLC

P.O. Box 77010

San Francisco, CA 94107

www.viz.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Names: Kishimoto, Masashi, 1974– author. | Yano, Takashi, 1976– author. |

Allen, Jocelyne, 1974– translator.

Title: Naruto: Shikamaru's story : a cloud drifting in the silent dark /

Masashi Kishimoto, Takashi Yano ; translated by Jocelyne Allen.

Other titles: Naruto. Shikamaru-Hiden: Yami no Shijima ni Ukabu Kumo. English | Shikamaru's story : cloud drifting in the silent dark | Cloud drifting in the silent

dark Description: San Francisco : VIZ Media, [2016] | Series: Naruto

Identifiers: LCCN 2015035922 | ISBN 9781421584416 (paperback)

Subjects: LCSH: Ninja--Fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Media Tie-In.

Classification: LCC PL872.5.I57 N3613 2016 | DDC 895.6/36--dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2015035922>

Printed in the U.S.A.

First printing, February 2016

NARUTO
SHIKAMARU'S
STORY

A Cloud Drifting
in the Silent Dark

ORIGINAL STORY BY
Masashi Kishimoto

WRITTEN BY
Takashi Yano

TRANSLATED BY
Jocelyne Allen

CONTENTS

[Characters](#)

[*Konoha*](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[*The Land of Silence*](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[5](#)

[6](#)

[7](#)

[*Shikamaru*](#)

[1](#)

[2](#)

[3](#)

[4](#)

[*End*](#)

[About Masashi Kishimoto](#)

[About Takashi Yano](#)



CHARACTERS



Akimichi Choji

Ninja from Konohagakure



Nara Shikamaru

Ninja from Konohagakure



Yamanaka Ino

Ninja from Konohagakure



Temari

Ninja from Sunagakure



Sai

Ninja from Konohagakure



Gengo

Leader of the Land of Silence



Soku

Anbu from Konohagakure



Ro

Anbu from Konohagakure



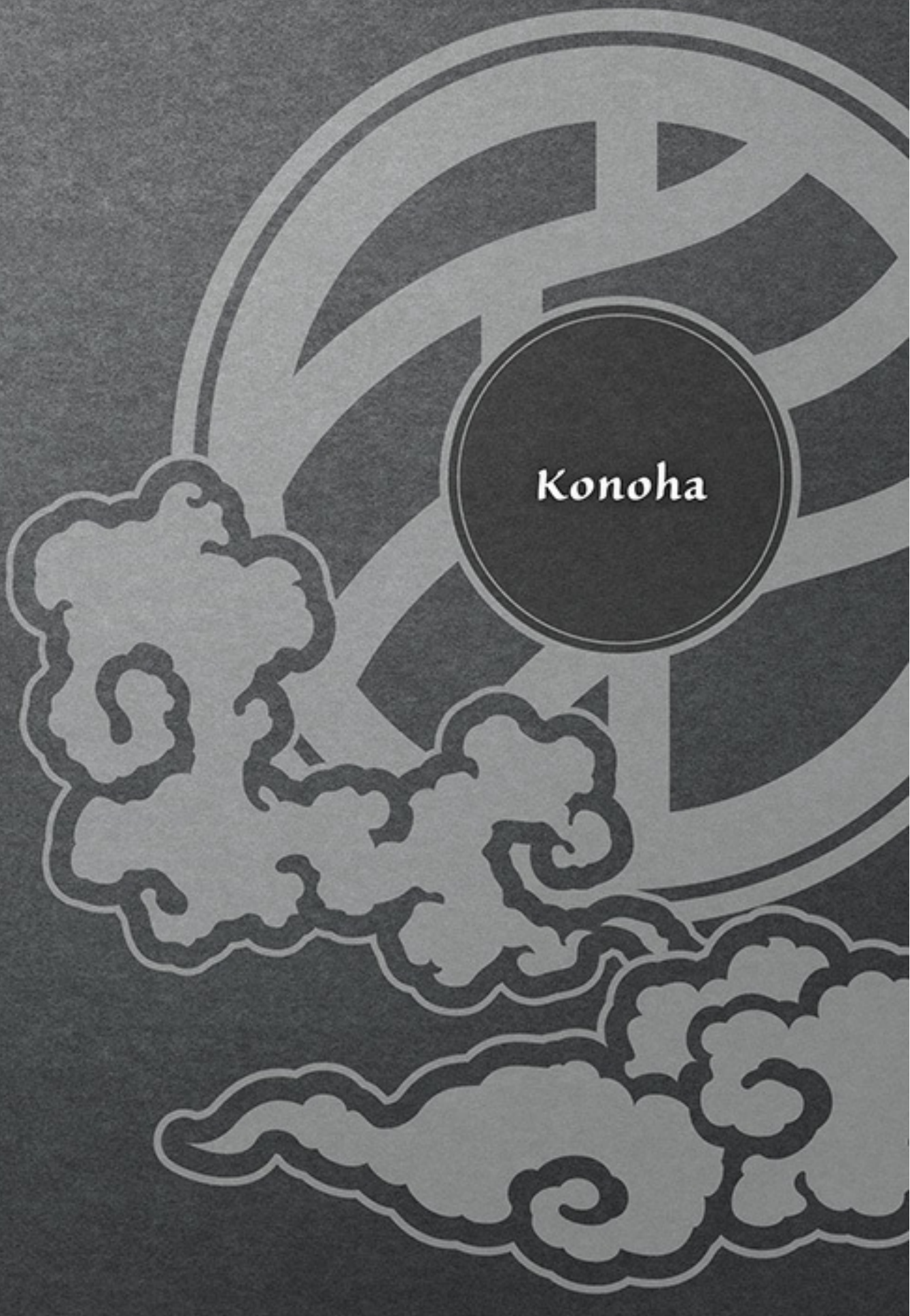
Uzumaki Naruto

Hero from Konohagakure



Hatake Kakashi

Sixth Hokage

The image features a dark gray background with a large, light gray stylized symbol in the upper right. The symbol consists of a circle with a vertical line and a horizontal line intersecting at the center, creating four quadrants. The top and bottom quadrants are filled with a darker gray, while the left and right quadrants are white. Below the symbol are stylized, swirling clouds in a light gray color. In the center of the symbol, the word "Konoha" is written in a white, serif font.

Konoha

Konoha

1

When exactly did I stop saying “What a drag”...?

Shikamaru considered the question as he looked up at the sky, where one thin cloud after another briskly sailed by, despite the wind not being especially strong. The hurried confusion above him was not so different from the twisting and turning in his own heart, and Shikamaru smiled wryly.

At any rate, he was busy.

More than two years had passed since the Fourth Great Ninja War, and the world was finally starting to settle down again. The Five Kage Alliance, born of the outbreak of war, remained intact, leading to a dramatically different world for shinobi. The original alliance had been established among the five hidden villages, but after the Great War, the smaller neighboring lands were quick to announce their intention to join the larger group. Shinobi from every part of the continent were now a part of the organization, which had slowly developed from a loose alliance into a more formal union. The work previously undertaken by individual villages before the launch of the Five Kage Alliance now came in batches to the union. Ninja representatives from every region in the union then discussed and assigned missions to the villages. Being able to ensure a steady flow of work corrected disparities among them, finally bringing an era of peace and stability to the world of the shinobi.

“Aah.” The sigh melted into the air. The stone beneath him was cold, meaning that his back was essentially frozen. *If I don’t move, I’m gonna catch a cold or something*, he thought, and yet he had a reason for not getting up.

Work was waiting.

An absolutely ridiculous amount of work. And he couldn’t figure out where to even start with it.

If he simply thought of this time as a brief break, he could keep lying here like this in the middle of the day. But once he got up, that dream would die. His

brain would immediately shift into work mode. And once that happened, he knew he wouldn't be able to lie down again. So he continued to lounge obstinately on the cold stone roof of the Hokage Residence. And as long as no one came around looking for him, he intended to stay like that.

Beyond the round roof, he could see the stony mountain, the faces of the generations of Hokage carved into it. In order from the right were the first Hokage, Hashirama, and his younger brother, Tobirama. They were followed by the third Hokage, Hiruzen, who died in Orochimaru's operation to destroy Konoha, and Namikaze Minato, the "Yellow Flash." The fifth Hokage, Tsunade, was one of the three legendary shinobi alongside Orochimaru and Jiraiya. These were the historical Hokage.

The face of the current Hokage was next to Tsunade's. Sleepy eyes under wiry hair. The lower half of his symmetrical face with its sharp nose covered by a mask. The Hokage was the symbol of Konohagakure, someone every ninja in Konoha had to approve before ascension. The face in the mountain was meant to carve the Hokage's face into memory, and yet the lower half of this man's was hidden by a mask.

Hatake Kakashi, Hokage.

Every single soul in the shinobi world knew him as the master of the two heroes who brought about the end of the Fourth Great Ninja War. Shikamaru, however, had a much closer relationship with Kakashi and those two heroes, and he felt disconnected from all the fuss made over them. People told him they were heroes and legends and praised them to high heaven, but he definitely wouldn't use words like that to describe any of them. Kakashi was a man who stepped up to the plate when he had to, but in everyday life he was a total waste of a grown-up with no interest in doing anything.

And the two so-called heroes were the same. One was a complete and total idiot. And the other was utterly pigheaded. There was no helping either of them, and yet they were called "living legends." Shikamaru honestly did not understand this world.

"What am I even doing..." His thoughts naturally spilled out from his mouth.

Shikamaru was very much not the hero type. To start with, he had never

wanted to be a hero. He wasn't interested in polishing his ninjutsu and being one of those super industrious types, either. He also didn't particularly want to study medical ninjutsu and become a rear-guard support specialist, and training in computation or rhetoric to become an official seemed like a giant yawn.

Just right at everything, that was Shikamaru's dream. As a ninja of just the right rank, he would carry out just the right missions, marry just the right girl, and live with their just-right children. And then an old age that was just right... Somehow, each day would end without anything in particular happening. Was there anything happier than that? He didn't think so.

On nice days, he could lie around like this and send his thoughts chasing after the flowing clouds as he stared up at the sky. On rainy days, he'd pour a drink for his shogi opponent. No one expecting anything from him, not the tiniest bit of pressure. Stress would never darken his heart. What a wonderful life that would be.

"Haaah..." The heavy, weighty sigh sounded as though it were seeping out from the depths of his stomach.

This thing reality was a truly formidable enemy.

Against a human enemy, Shikamaru would have a real chance of winning. Even a godlike enemy, as long as they had a physical form, would have to have a weak spot somewhere. In fact, his opponents in the last Great War had all had at least a bit of monster in them, but Shikamaru and his comrades had rallied their forces and defeated each and every one of them.

He could beat a real enemy.

But...

There was no way he could defeat an enemy with no physical form: i.e., reality. And whether he liked it or not, reality was callously carrying him off in a different direction.

Despite Shikamaru simply wanting a just-right life, he had somehow become an essential part of the Allied Shinobi. He worked to divide up the work requests brought in by the daimyo and citizens of each land into ranks A through D, and assigned those missions, taking into account the special

characteristics of each village before determining which was best suited to the task. He discussed and negotiated any number of issues with the five great nations. He even played shogi with the aging Tsuchikage; he could manage any task. Some even said the Allied Shinobi worked because of Konohagakure's Shikamaru.

The more he resisted, the more he tried not to stand out, the more disinterested he was in advancing through the ranks, the more he was pushed up by those around him.

His first mistake had been the chunin selection exams, where genin from the entire continent, from the five great nations down to adjacent smaller nations, came together. For some reason, while the shinobi world was rocked by disaster and strife—Konohagakure rogue ninja, Orochimaru's secret maneuvering, the death of the third Hokage—Shikamaru was the only one allowed the promotion to chunin. He was the lone graduate.

And it wasn't as though he had particularly worked for it. During the one-on-one fight part of the exam, he had initially been thrown completely by a cheeky female ninja when she used a ridiculously large fan to create storm-level winds, but in the end the fight had come to a stalemate, and he had surrendered.

That had been well received.

Once a ninja became a chunin, they had people under them. The quality deemed most valuable for this purpose was an ability to accurately assess any given situation. The examiners handed down top marks for Shikamaru's sportsmanlike admission of defeat.

This was a mixed blessing.

He hadn't even wanted to take the exam; he'd been forced into it by his master Sarutobi Asuma. He hadn't had any intention of getting good marks or any real interest in doing it at all. But reality led Shikamaru to the rank of chunin, and the way the villagers looked at him changed.

It was around this time that his life plan started slipping off the rails.

When Sasuke left the village, Shikamaru had chased after him as the leader of a team of ninja in his class. After that, he was seen as standing a head higher

than others in his year and given responsibility for a number of missions. The more he resisted, the more reality pulled Shikamaru higher and higher.

Two years after the Fourth Great Ninja War, Shikamaru turned nineteen, an age at which he could no longer be called a child.

How fortunate he was to have people counting on him. How wonderful it was to be needed by people. No one had to tell him; he knew it. Shikamaru's friends had actually risen all the way to the top to become heroes of the village—of all ninja—simply out of the desire to be needed by people. He knew without anyone having to tell him that people were creatures who needed others. Which was why he didn't feel weird when someone said to him, *If you weren't here...* If he was needed, he'd face whatever problem needed facing unflinchingly, with everything he had; he hadn't once cut corners on a mission.

Nineteen years since he'd been born into this world.

Already, his entire self was ensnared by too many ties and obligations. Akatsuki, the organization plotting to rule the world, had killed his teacher Asuma. And Asuma had had a girlfriend named Kurenai, and Asuma's baby had lived in her belly. That baby was already two years old. Her name was Mirai.

Become Mirai's teacher...

It was a promise he had to keep.

Shikamaru's father, Shikaku, had worked as an officer of the Allied Shinobi during the Fourth Great Ninja War. He died with Ino's father, Inoichi, when Obito's maneuvering ended in Ten Tails's Biju Bomb blowing up the alliance headquarters. The last words of his father and Inoichi were still clear in his ears even now.

Never forget that we live on inside you. Forever.

Become a great man like your father...

He had sworn it to the man who gave him life in this world.

And Naruto. The shinobi hero, always forthright, never doubting for a second he would someday be Hokage.

Huh. I'm the only one who can be his advisor, Shikamaru had thought on

death's doorstep, as Sakura treated his injuries in the battle with Ten Tails.

Make Naruto the Hokage and be his right hand.

That was the dream.

He was bound by so many ties and obligations, he couldn't even count them all. He had no doubt these were the power propelling him forward. Shikamaru could live as Shikamaru precisely because everyone had him in their hearts.

And yet...

It was exhausting sometimes. The real him wasn't the man everyone thought he was. He was the sort you could find anywhere, who felt like every little thing was a drag, who dreamed of having a just-right life. The more people expected of him, the more he wanted to run away. That was the true nature of this man, Shikamaru.

Way back when, his friends had understood his tendency to find everything to be a hassle, his lack of motivation. When had everyone started getting the wrong idea? When had Shikamaru stopped saying "what a drag"? He felt like both had happened around the same time.

"That's..." As he stared up at the clouds, a deep crease carved itself out between his eyebrows. His almond-shaped eyes focused on a single point in space, where he could just make out a lone falcon.

The majestic bird, wings spread, turned slowly to the west in the creeping crimson of the early-evening sky, Shikamaru in the middle of its arcing trajectory. Or rather, more accurately, the circle of its flight had the Hokage Residence as its center.

This wasn't a matter to simply sit up for. He stood. His mind, drifting along on a boundless ocean only seconds before, had already snapped back to reality, a whetted blade. His eyes caught hold of the falcon and didn't let go.

Jet black...

The falcon was a pure black, as though it had been drawn in ink. No, it really *had* been drawn in ink. The Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry, Sai's jutsu.

Sai had taken Sasuke's place on Team 7, the team Naruto and Sakura

belonged to. With his special technique, the Art of Cartoon Beast Mimicry, he could give life to the beasts and birds he drew and make them move.

The falcon flying above Shikamaru's head was drawn by Sai.

"Finally here, huh," he muttered to himself, as the falcon stopped circling in the sky and started to descend.

Shikamaru started running. His feet headed for the stairs to the lower level, at the bottom of which was the Hokage's office, the falcon's destination. He grabbed on to the staircase railing, and the bird disappeared into the side of the building, brushing up against his cheek as it did. He very nearly flew down the stairs and raced along the hallway.

The office.

He opened the door without knocking.

"Oh, Shikamaru," Kakashi said. He was standing in front of a desk piled with a mess of documents and books, holding out a scroll.

"Sai's falcon just came into this room."

"Mm." Kakashi flipped around the scroll he had been reading so Shikamaru could see it.

Text dancing on a white background leapt into Shikamaru's field of view. He rushed over to get a closer look.

"It seems the situation is even more serious than I thought," Kakashi said, looking at Shikamaru. His eyes were so fierce he was almost glaring, and his usual absentminded tone was also abnormally serious, all of which gave Shikamaru a bad feeling.

His eyes chased after the characters written on the scroll: "I don't know myself anymore..." This last sentence alone, spelled out in a fine brush, looked to Shikamaru especially vivid.

2

Dear Sixth Hokage,

I don't have much time, so I will be brief.

With regard to the matter of concern, I have concluded my investigation to a certain extent. However, not one of my ten companions has returned, and I am now alone. It is not certain whether they are dead or alive. But there seems to be no doubt that they were detected by the enemy.

Allow me to get right to the point.

The state of affairs in the Land of Silence is several times more serious than you suspected, Hokage. If the land is left to continue as is, the Allied Shinobi will be faced with a predicament at some point. In fact, I believe this situation could potentially change the framework of the world itself.

There is a man at work in this land. His name is Gengo. Gengo is the Land of Silence, and the Land of Silence is Gengo. It would be no exaggeration to say that everything in the Land of Silence is for Gengo.

Fascinating.

That is the most appropriate word to describe him.

Gengo may very well change the world. Perhaps that's something I want. The ninja is a creature with so little in the way of salvation, don't you think? We endure, thus we are ninja. Is that really enough?

Lord Hokage.

Kakashi.

I don't know myself anymore...

Lifting his face from the letter, Shikamaru let out a short sigh. Before him, Kakashi sat with his elbows up on the desk. He wasn't wearing the conical hat he always wore when he went out as Hokage or was on official Hokage business, and his hair brushed against his forehead, having grown somewhat over the last two years. His face from the nose down was, as always, covered by a mask. Resting his chin on clasped hands, Kakashi stared silently at Shikamaru.

“What do you think?” he asked, coolly.

The Hokage’s office. They were the only ones there.

“Why did Sai send a cartoon beast and not return himself?”

“Good question.” Kakashi lifted his chin from his hands and threw himself back in his chair. Sticking his chin out and staring at the ceiling above him, he sighed even more heavily than Shikamaru had. “From that letter, it seems like everyone other than Sai has already fallen into enemy hands or been killed.”

“Looks like.”

“Sai was leading a team of ten masters, the cream of the crop, even amongst members of the Anbu. I can’t believe they would be so careless as to expose themselves to the enemy. This enemy must be fairly adept too.” As he spoke, Kakashi twirled around in his chair. He disappeared from view behind the backrest, then reappeared as he spun all the way around again. No matter how dire the situation, Kakashi never tensed up.

Normally, the more urgent something was, the more a person froze up, both mentally and physically. But Kakashi tried to keep his thinking loose by deliberately doing something frivolous, like whirling around in his chair. A competent ninja, he had likely come by this behavior naturally through surviving long years of battle and bloodshed.

“Mm-hmm.” Shikamaru opened his mouth, a tense look on his face, as Kakashi stared absentmindedly at the ceiling. “So break them out, I guess.”

“Yeah,” came Kakashi’s immediate, brief reply, face still turned away from Shikamaru and up at the ceiling.

“If he’s sending this kind of letter,” Shikamaru continued, “then he should have returned to the village himself and reported to you, Lord Hokage—”

“How many times have I told you to call me Kakashi?” Kakashi finally looked at Shikamaru. “When did you get so stiff? You used to be more relaxed, it was nice.”

“I can’t be a child forever.”

“Naruto’s still a ‘child’ even now.”

“That guy is who he is.”

“Oh, is that it...” Kakashi got a sad look in his eyes before dropping them down to the letter from Sai spread out on the desk. Sai’s Cartoon Beast Mimicry transformed a written message into an animal, dispatched it to its destination, and turned the beast back into the original text when it arrived at a blank scroll. The jet-black falcon Shikamaru had seen on the roof was the message Kakashi was reading now. “The state of affairs in the Land of Silence is several times worse than I thought, huh?”

“So I suppose we should assume that the majority of the ninja who disappeared in the Great War and any recent rogue ninja are in the Land of Silence, then?”

“If Sai is making declarations like this, I suppose so.”

“The Land of Silence...”

Everything went back to the events of two years earlier.

Many had been sacrificed in the Fourth Great Ninja War brought about by Uchiha Madara and Uchiha Obito. The shinobi of the five great nations, faced with supernatural powers beyond the realm of the human, joined together to stand against them. In the end, they managed to defeat Otsutsuki Kaguya, the one controlling Madara from the shadows, and end the war.

A time of peace came, and the nations started dealing with the aftermath of the intense struggle, which was when identifying the dead and the missing became a more pressing matter. The battle had been fierce enough to alter the terrain of the continent, so those who left behind corpses were lucky. Given this, many more were identified as missing than dead in the villages: somewhere around ten thousand people in the five great nations, sacrifices of the Great War—a war that threatened to destroy not only the ninja villages, but the world itself. Some said they were lucky to have made it through with only thousands lost.

But Shikamaru didn’t think so. Even one death was a death. Even one unavoidable sacrifice was too many.

In the Great War, he had lost a friend, Hyuga Neji. To Shikamaru, Neji was not

a number, not one in ten thousand. His friend's death itself was everything. And the same could be said for any one of the people lost in the war. He felt the death of a single person could never be explained away in a simple word like "sacrifice."

Which was exactly why they could not allow a war to break out.

"So just how many of the missing drifted into the Land of Silence exactly?" Kakashi muttered, interrupting Shikamaru's thoughts.

Just as Kakashi noted, Shikamaru was aware that of the ninja who had gone missing at the end of the Great War, more than a few had survived and gone into hiding. He had first realized this at the Allied Shinobi headquarters. All work requests came through the alliance headquarters, allowing him to see before anyone else the number and types of requests coming in. In an unusual turn a year earlier, the number of ninja requests had dropped so much that the change was practically visible.

With the five great ninja nations having chosen a path of cooperation, the number of battles in the surface world ruled by the daimyos had also decreased remarkably in recent times. Requests for A-and B-rank work—the dangerous missions—were also on the decline. But the situation was not as simple as that. The number of comparatively easy C-and D-rank requests had shrunk as well.

Shikamaru had heard about this problem promptly, given that he had a seat at headquarters. But just because the number of requests was declining didn't necessarily mean there was something specific they could do about it. As an alliance, they had reached the conclusion that they would watch how things progressed for the time being.

But a man had appeared to link the issue of the declining requests with another problem from after the Great War—Kakashi, sitting at the desk in front of him. The problem Kakashi had his eye on: the ninja who had started going rogue in the five great shinobi nations about a year earlier. Once a month, a new ninja would desert from each village, making twelve ninja per village up to that point. Combining the five villages, a total of sixty shinobi had disappeared, all of them young, single men.

Desertion was a serious crime. Naturally, the villages had sent out pursuers.

But they had not been able to catch even one of the missing ninja.

“Maybe it wasn’t a good idea to send backup and have Sai investigating this the whole time. I should have pulled him in and let him catch his breath before heading back to the Land of Silence.”

“It’s too late to second-guess yourself now.”

“You’re right.”

After leaving the village to investigate the matter of the rogue ninja, Sai had found a small clue and reported back just over a month ago. Kakashi had the idea that the rogue ninja and the sharp drop in work requests might be closely related, and so he told Sai to continue his investigation and dispatched additional members of the Anbu to back him up.

The clue Sai had arrived at: the Land of Silence.

The continent was made up of the five great nations, home to the five great hidden shinobi villages, with medium-sized and minor countries wedged between these, all vying for power. To the far west was the Land of Silence. With no shinobi village and absolutely no contact with any other nation, it was called the Land of Silence for its quiet ways and refusal to share its stories. Like the other lands, it was populated with citizens ruled by a daimyo, but absolutely no other details slipped out of this closed country.

And Sai said that somehow, Konoha’s rogue ninja had escaped there. That was not the only bit of information fueling concern. Some of the Konoha ninja who had gone missing in the Great War were there too. Rogue and missing ninja were gathering in the Land of Silence. But to what end?

Kakashi saw that this was the reason for the sudden drop in requests to the alliance.

“What do you think’s happened to Sai?”

“He’s alive.”

“I think so too.” Beneath the mask, Kakashi’s mouth pulled itself into a smile. “This fixation on the man Gengo, the letter’s practically oozing with it—it reads something like admiration.” He touched the letter, written in Sai’s flowing brush

strokes.

Shikamaru picked up on his words, as though reading his mind. “I don’t want to believe it, but Sai might have been taken in by this Gengo.”

“He’s purehearted, that guy.”

“If he’s alive, we have to save him.”

“We do.” Kakashi’s scarred left eye was colored with a dark shadow, and Shikamaru was acutely aware of what this capable Hokage was not saying.

There was something more important than saving their comrade.

Shikamaru brought it out into the open himself. “If the situation in the Land of Silence is like Sai says, and they are active in the way that you suspect, Lord Hokage, then we have to strike as soon as possible.”

“I know.”

Shikamaru didn’t stop. “It’s been two years since the Great War. The villages have finally gotten their feet back under them, but currently no nation has even half the power they once had.”

“We can’t go to war.”

“Exactly.”

Letting out another heavy sigh, Kakashi stood up. He walked around the desk strewn with scrolls and documents to stand next to Shikamaru. “Looks like you have the same idea I do.”

“Yes.”

“In that case, you probably know what I’m thinking?”

“You want to go yourself.”

In his youth, Kakashi had made some noise as a member of the Anbu, a capable warrior even in this special unit, the sole purpose of which was to take on dark, clandestine missions. Shikamaru saw a darkness whispering deep in Kakashi’s eyes, twisted into a bow shape by his smile.

“You’re the Lord Hokage,” Shikamaru spit out, staring straight into this darkness. “You more than understand your own position. You must already be

aware that your wish cannot be granted.”

“Your head works as fast as Master Minato’s ninjutsu.”

Shikamaru stared, not responding.

“Anyway, if it’s like Sai said, then the key to the Land of Silence is this man Gengo.” Kakashi tossed his words at the silent Shikamaru.

“Yes.”

“If we can do something about him, then we’ll no longer have a problem, right?”

“I think so too.”

“So then...” Kakashi placed his hands on his hips like an old man and stretched deeply. “Who do you think I should send?”

“I’ll go.”

“What?” Kakashi’s eyes grew round. “Don’t you have a pretty big role to play already? You’re shouldering a part of the alliance as Konoha’s representative. You don’t need to go doing assassination work anymore.”

Assassination...

Kakashi had said it. By putting into words the thought they shared, he had made it real. If it came to a fight between the Allied Shinobi and the Land of Silence, the alliance might be thrown into confusion once more, after it had finally and at great cost pulled itself together into its current stable form. And with each nation utterly and thoroughly exhausted, there wasn’t a soul anywhere looking for a new fight.

If they believed Sai’s letter, assassinating Gengo would be the most effective method of silencing the Land of Silence.

“The fewer people who know about this, the better.”

“That doesn’t mean *you* need to go.”

“My friends have been captured. Please let me do this.”

Kakashi held his tongue, as if his objections had been squashed by Shikamaru’s insistence.

Shikamaru thought about it. Kakashi was right; he didn't have to go. A critical part of the work of someone higher up the chain was selecting the right person for the job and entrusting them with the necessary tasks. Even still, Shikamaru had volunteered.

He didn't know why, really. He just could not for the life of him stand by and do nothing.

3

“And that concludes our meeting. Does anyone have any questions?” the host of the session asked, his tone disinterested.

Shikamaru listened with closed eyes. The bespectacled chairman was a shinobi from Kirigakure named Chojuro, and Shikamaru remembered that he had guarded the Mizukage during the Great Ninja War.

“It seems that no one does. So, Shikamaru?” Chojuro prompted from one side of him.

Opening just his right eye to look at Chojuro, Shikamaru nodded slightly before opening the other eye. Ten ninja sat at the round table, men and women, mostly somewhere near his own age.

The Allied Shinobi headquarters in the Land of Iron.

There were no ninja in the Land of Iron, where the power of the samurai dominated. Before the last Great War, the hidden ninja of the five great villages had held their meetings in this shinobi-free land, meetings which later became the alliance of the five great nations before morphing into the current Allied Shinobi Forces. Given that the Land of Iron was the birthplace of this continental alliance, they had decided to build its headquarters there, and ninja from each village, with a focus on the five great nations, came together in this building, working day and night to develop the world of ninja.

The ten people gathered there with Shikamaru were the rising stars of their villages, including candidates for the next kage ninja. The meeting was a place where those responsible for the next generation could discuss the future of the shinobi world. In addition to Shikamaru and the others, chairman Chojuro, Temari from Sunagakure, and Omoi from Kumogakure were in attendance. Shikamaru had been given the job of leading the gathering. It wasn't something he had volunteered for; he had simply been nominated by everyone else in the room.

“Shikamaru?” Chojuro said, worried about the still-silent Shikamaru.

He cleared his throat and looked around at the assembled group before

opening a heavy mouth. “Doesn’t look like we have anything new to put on the agenda. I really hope our meetings will continue to be as relaxed as this one,” he said, standing up. “All right, everyone, I’ll see you again in a month.” He collected the papers spread out over the round table, tucked them under his arm, and turned his back to the others. Baffled by their leader’s curt attitude, the attendees began to trickle out of the room.

He walked matter-of-factly down the long hallway, cold white walls extending ahead and behind. Many ninja were busily hurrying along, but their footfalls made absolutely no sound. They were ninja. An audible footstep was an absurdity. This level of movement control was the first of the most basic of steps at the academy.

“Oi!” A voice called to Shikamaru from behind.

He clicked his tongue imperceptibly. The voice belonged to the person he least wanted to speak with at that moment. Ignoring it, he kept moving forward.

“Shikamaru, hold up!” The voice beat at his back, threatening to send him flying.

“What?” He turned just his head to look at the woman over his shoulder.

Temari from Sunagakure. Her hair was shorter now than it had been two years ago, and she had pulled it back into two bundles on either side of her head. Her eyes were gentler now than they had been, set in a fairly adult-looking face. But given that she was older than Shikamaru, her face didn’t just look grown-up; she was actually already a very fine adult.

“What’s going on with you?” She stared at Shikamaru with eyes that drooped somewhat more than they used to.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve been weird lately.” Temari’s slender hand reached out to Shikamaru’s shoulder and pulled him around to face her.

What a drag... The words made it all the way to his throat before he managed to desperately swallow them back down.

“I mean your attitude at the meeting there. You just sit there with your mouth shut. Everyone gets nervous; the whole place tenses up, you know.”

“It does?”

“You didn’t notice it?” Temari’s eyes grew wide. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s something you can’t talk to me about?” Temari’s hard gaze hurt.

In the two years since the Great War ended, Temari had been a good and understanding partner in their work on the alliance. She shared his desire to keep the shinobi from fracturing into factions once more after they had finally come together in the face of a powerful enemy. She had rallied the Allied Forces with him. The strong bond between Naruto, seen as a candidate for the next Hokage of Konoha, and Gaara, the Kazekage of Sunagakure, also played a part; the relationship between the two villages was extremely good, even among the five great nations. With these kinds of outside factors also at work, Shikamaru and Temari each recognized the other as their greatest ally in the alliance.

“Something’s happening in Konoha.” She had fairly good insight.

However, her shot was a little off. Nothing was happening in Konoha, although it was true that they were trying to take care of the situation with only the shinobi of Konoha. So Temari was half-right, half-wrong.

The basic policy of the alliance was that matters relating to the life or death of shinobi themselves exceeded the framework of the villages and should be shared with the entire group. What Shikamaru and Kakashi were attempting to do was in very clear violation of this policy. Even so, he couldn’t say anything. Getting the alliance involved now and stirring up trouble with the Land of Silence was not a good plan.

I’ll handle it... His resolve hardened.

“Is there anything I can do?”

“There’s not.”

Temari dropped her eyes at Shikamaru’s curt reply. “Okay,” she muttered,

lifelessly. In the next instant, the brief look of sadness on her face changed to anger.

It was all he could do to take a breath. He had no room to dodge; before he knew it, Shikamaru was flying. He tumbled down the hall a few times before ending up on his backside in a seated position. The right side of his face swelled up, bright red. Stroking his hot cheek, Shikamaru looked up at an indignant Temari glaring down at him.

“I never actually thought I could’ve misjudged you so badly!” Her angry yell turned into a powerful wind, pushing up against his face.

“I-I’m sorry...” The words were unconscious. He unthinkingly took on the persona of his father stumbling home in the morning, only to get yelled at by his mother in the entryway.

Taking long strides, Temari passed by Shikamaru and disappeared, her eyes slightly damp.

∞

“You haven’t even touched your food,” Choji said, sitting in front of him and puffing out both cheeks like a chipmunk.

They were at a yakiniku place. Ino was sitting beside Shikamaru. Both of his friends had become serious adults over the last two years. Choji was as chubby as ever, but his eyes were fearless now, and he had grown a beard of all things. Ino let her hair grow ever longer and wore it unbound, which made her look a fair bit older than her years.

“Did you eat before you came?” Choji’s cheeks sank in, his throat moved up and down, and the meat fell to the bottom of his stomach.

“Shikamaru and I both had our growth spurts a long time ago, so we don’t need to shovel food into our faces like you do!”

“No way!” Choji’s eyes grew round.

Unthinkingly, Shikamaru laughed out loud. A gentle wind blew through his heart. He hadn’t felt this way in a long time. “Why would I eat something when I know I’m coming to have dinner with you guys?” he said, reaching out to the

grill with his chopsticks and grabbing a piece of meat on the verge of burning.

“I was cooking that!” came Choji’s angry yell.

“Woh-kay.”

They had danced this particular dance who knew how many times before. In a familiar gesture, Shikamaru put the piece of meat back and turned his chopsticks to the beef rib next to it. He glanced at Ino out of the corner of his eye. She nodded, and so he took the rib and set it on his small plate.

“It’s been a long time since you asked us out,” she remarked.

“True. And lately, you guys only hang out with me when I ask you out, so.”

“You’re super busy, Shikamaru, with alliance work, supporting Lord Hokage. We can’t take up all your time or anything.”

Eyes slightly cast downward, Choji puffed his cheeks out. “Yeah, but still...”

On the one hand, he was honestly glad they were concerned about him, but he was also sad there was this distance between them. Now that he was grown-up, he couldn’t do whatever he wanted like he had when he was a kid. Things were different now. The days when he would meet his friends after the academy lessons and play until it got dark were over.

In the same way that he had responsibilities with the alliance and in Konohagakure, Ino and Choji were also quite valued as capable chunin who had made it through the Great War. They could talk all they wanted about how busy Shikamaru was, but the fact was they weren’t in any position to take time whenever they wanted to either. Still, when he said he wanted to see them, they just came and hung out without another word.

They were the best friends.

“What’s wrong?” Ino asked Shikamaru, tilting her beer mug back in a masculine fashion.

“Nah, it’s nothing. I just wanted to talk with you guys is all.” Shikamaru brought the meat on his plate up to his mouth.

“Oh, that all?” Ino didn’t ask him anything else.

Choji kept shoving bits of cooked meat into his mouth, the smile never leaving his face.

The back and forth of easy conversation.

The way Choji ate.

Ino's love stories.

And memories of Asuma...

His distance from the two of them shrank.

He almost went back in time to the self he had been when they first came to this restaurant with Asuma. Back then, every other thing he said had been "what a drag."

Looking at Choji and Ino all grown up, Shikamaru whispered in his heart that they could never go back to those days.

∞

He walked home alone. In the end, he hadn't been able to tell them.

If he was going to go to the Land of Silence, he had thought it would be with them, which was why he'd invited them for yakiniku. But when he looked at their smiling faces, he couldn't bring himself to say it.

The road he was about to step onto was dark. To save Konoha, the alliance, and all ninja, he was going to kill a man. He wouldn't be fighting tall and proud and winning. He would be killing in secret. Assassination. Which was not all that remarkable for a shinobi. Once you grew up, you understood that this sort of thing too was necessary in the world.

But...

The fewer people who got their hands dirty, the better. He couldn't bring himself to drag Choji and Ino into the darkness.

"Guess it's the Anbu, after all." There wasn't a single star in the night sky to which he raised his face.

4

Shikamaru was in Kakashi's office. The sixth Hokage was busily scribbling away, surrounded as always by a mountain of documents scattered about at random, free hand held up as a signal for the younger man to wait until he was finished. Through the open window on the other side of the Hokage, Shikamaru could see the streets of Konoha. The town had a calm air, lit up by the bright midday sun.

"Sorry to make you wait," Kakashi said, slapping bundles of papers together on his desk. "So what did you need?"

"It's about the Land of Silence."

"Oh, that..."

Shikamaru still hadn't reported on the alliance meeting of the other day. There wasn't anything he particularly needed to call attention to, so he simply left it. Apparently, Kakashi had been anticipating the meeting report.

"The alliance is the same as always. It's staffed with capable people. There's nothing to worry about."

"You're one of those 'capable people,' you know."

Am I really, in the end? Am I really the person assigned to be Konohagakure's representative?

"You really plan to go?"

"Yes."

Kakashi let out a sigh. "Do you need to go?"

"Sai's been captured. And there are people there who defected from the village or who went missing in the Great War. We have to find out whether they're staying there of their own free will or if they've been captured by this Gengo."

"Seems like you're decided."

He said nothing, but simply nodded.

“Understood.” Closing his eyes, Kakashi shook his head from side to side before looking at Shikamaru once more. “I won’t say anything else. So who are you going to take with you? You’re not planning to go alone, are you?”

“Could I be given two members of the Anbu?”

“Ohh.” Kakashi placed his elbows on his desk and rested his chin on clasped hands, his eyes serious. “You don’t want Ino or Choji?”

“The Ino-Shika-Cho combination is effective in aboveboard fights, but is not appropriate for missions such as this.”

“Because it’s an assassination.”

“And infiltration is a large factor in this as well. If possible, I want people who can hide their chakra.”

“Mm-hmm.” Kakashi lowered his eyes and considered the situation. As someone with a background in the Anbu, he was well versed in the state of affairs over there. He seemed to be taking in Shikamaru’s request and listing candidates in his head. “You won’t be the one to strike the final blow.”

“I intend to restrain the target with my jutsu.”

“Then you’ll need someone to actually take him down,” Kakashi said, anticipating his words. Shikamaru had in fact been thinking the same thing.

Two members of the Anbu. One a shinobi who could mold chakra to hide Shikamaru’s presence, and the other a ninja with a jutsu to actually shoot the target down.

“You’ll need the right people.”

“Thank you.”

“I’ll arrange it immediately.”

“Don’t you have other work to do first?”

“Nothing more urgent than this matter with you,” Kakashi replied, and Shikamaru felt the immensity of being Hokage.

The Hokage coolly judged the seriousness of any situation and made a prompt decision. And because he did, the ninja could use their abilities to the fullest for

the sake of the village. It was something Shikamaru couldn't possibly do. He had never once wanted to be Hokage. But it would indeed be a lie to say there wasn't something there he yearned for. The still-young Shikamaru felt frustration at the fact that he couldn't go up against the largeness of Kakashi as a man.

"I'll have the two of them return right away. Can you wait a little longer?"

"I'd appreciate it if we could do this as soon as possible."

"I know." Smiling, Kakashi stood up. He turned his back to Shikamaru and stared out the window. "You don't have to take on a burden like this, you know," he murmured.

Shikamaru didn't answer.

Take on a burden...

Maybe he was. Before he even realized it, Shikamaru had ended up carrying all kinds of things on his back. Even though he thought anything and everything was a hassle, he grabbed on to all sorts of things in a way that was actually unlike him, things that were so heavy he could barely carry them. But he still couldn't bring himself to let go.

He was scared.

He had the feeling that if he threw it all away, he wouldn't be *him* anymore. He had always found things a drag. If he put his load down for a minute, would he be able to pick it back up again? Would anyone need him anymore? The thought frightened him so much he could hardly stand it.

"I'm going to tell you what I really think."

Flickers of lightning snaked out from Kakashi's left hand in the air.

"You want to toss aside all your obligations as Hokage and go to the Land of Silence right now."

Shikamaru could hear Kakashi's heart screaming that he wanted to drop everything, go to the Land of Silence, and eliminate Gengo himself. But the position of Hokage and all the responsibilities it entailed were not so easily abandoned.

“I just feel bad for putting all this on your shoulders.” Kakashi sighed. “Naruto and I and everyone from our year, we’re all in positions of responsibility now. You don’t have to carry everything on your own shoulders anymore.”

“Right.” The lightning melted into the sunlight. Kakashi turned around. “Shikamaru, what does it mean to be an adult?”

“Please don’t ask me things like that.”

∞

“I’ll come again,” Shikamaru said, turning his back to the tombstone.

The stone had NARA SHIKAKU carved on it. His father’s grave.

After the meeting with Kakashi, his feet had naturally brought him to the cemetery. *What does it mean to be an adult?* He had the feeling the answer to Kakashi’s question was here.

During the Fourth Great Ninja War, his father had been in the alliance headquarters with the five Kages. When the fighting grew more intense, the five Kages headed out to the front line, and his father took command of the entire army alongside Ino’s father, Inoichi. After awakening Ten Tails, Obito launched a Biju Bomb at the headquarters with the intent of throwing the entire army into chaos. As deadly shells rained down on them, Shikaku continued to give orders to the army until the very end.

He was a ninja up to the moment of his death.

No.

The truth was, for an instant before he died, Shikaku was a father. However, the only one who knew that was his son.

What is an adult? Shikamaru wondered. He said his farewell to his father’s grave, and his feet turned toward his next destination.

His master’s grave. Sarutobi Asuma.

Although he was of the same lineage as the third Hokage, Asuma refused the path of the elite in favor of taking a stand on the front line. Shikamaru came of age as a ninja under the tutelage of Asuma after graduating from the academy. With his good friends Choji and Ino, he tackled mission after mission, trying to

catch up to his master.

No matter what kind of difficult situation he found himself in, Asuma never lost his cool as he casually slipped a cigarette between his lips; he was Shikamaru's hero. And now Asuma was no longer of this world.

In the fight with the Akatsuki, who had been secretly maneuvering to take over the world, Asuma had died so that Shikamaru could live.

Understanding that they had no hope of defeating the Akatsuki, Asuma had wagered his own life to protect Shikamaru and his friends. He too had died thinking of other people right up until his last moment.

Shikamaru didn't yet have anything that he would sacrifice his own life to protect. The people of the village and his friends were definitely important to him, but he felt like it was different from how his father and Asuma had been so fiercely protective. In that sense, maybe Shikamaru was still not an adult. Maybe he was simply a child held captive by the ambiguity of the word "adult" itself. In which case, maybe Kakashi was a child too.

However, Kakashi already had something he would give his life for.

"To the Hokage, all the people of the village are your children." The words of the third Hokage, Hiruzen, Asuma's father. Kakashi had probably been a grown-up at the moment he chose a life as the Hokage.

Shikamaru didn't know what was what anymore.

"Shika!"

A carefree voice reached his ears, jolting him out of his meditations. Something was tottering toward him: a perfectly round baby, jerking perfectly round arms and legs out awkwardly in all directions. The baby was singularly focused on reaching Shikamaru.

"Mirai!" Shikamaru called the baby's name. His voice naturally grew brighter. His cheeks slackened, and a smile played across his lips.

"Eeah!"

When Mirai reached Shikamaru's feet, she hugged him with short arms. "Shika!" she said, in the same tone as before. Clinging to his legs as she looked

up at him, Mirai's grin was so wide it almost blinded him. He felt his frozen heart melt in the face of that smile like the sun.

"It's been a while, Shikamaru."

"Master Kurenai."

"I'm not your master anymore. You can stop calling me that," the woman with black hair said with a smile.

Sarutobi Kurenai. A jonin who had led Shikamaru's class at the same time as Asuma and Kakashi. Now, however, she was devoting herself to being Mirai's mother.

"Asuma's grave?"

"Yeah."

"What about your father's grave?"

"I was just there."

Even as Shikamaru and Kurenai talked, Mirai was nuzzling his legs with her face, still clinging to him with a smile. "Shika! I saw Papa now."

His heart warmed as he watched her struggle and push to communicate with her childish vocabulary and unmastered grammar.

Be this child's teacher...

He had promised Asuma and Kurenai he would.

"Is that so? You went and saw your daddy?" Shikamaru said, crouching down, and Mirai nodded in delight. Apparently, she was thrilled he had understood what she said. "What a clever girl you are, Mirai."

He patted her head, and the feel of her soft, tufty hair came through the palm of his hand, a gentle breeze blowing through his soul. "You hurry and get big, okay?"

"Uh-huh."

"You really do love big brother Shikamaru, don't you?" Kurenai said, and Mirai nodded so hard she stumbled forward.

Shikamaru held out both hands to keep her from falling over from the weight of her own head. *I can't die for this kid either, huh...*

"That's right!" Mirai said, in perfect timing with his thoughts.

"Thanks."

He picked the little girl up. Looking up at her as she squealed with vibrant laughter, he felt it once more, powerfully: *I can't die.*

5

A cat and monkey with white faces stood before him.

They were only animals from the neck up, however; from the neck down, both were human. On top of form-fitting, jet-black clothing, they wore the recently redesigned Konoha vests. The old vests had had pockets on both sides of the chest to store scrolls or ninja tools, but those had been taken out of the current version, and the end result was fairly simple. These vests were for a time of peace, befitting the end of the Great War and an era of cooperation among the villages.

Holes like deep caverns sat in the places where the cat and monkey faces should have had eyeballs. The mouths were shallow, upside-down Vs, the ends cutting into the cheeks. The cat had detailed red coloring below the cavernous eyes, while the monkey had a thicker red shadow on its brow, so that its eyebrows looked turned up in anger. Both had their hands pulled back and clasped together behind their hips. Both sets of dark caves were turned on Shikamaru.

“I think these two will meet your expectations,” Kakashi said, seated behind the desk. The cat and monkey stood on either side of him, the cat to Shikamaru’s right and the monkey to his left.

Their heights were drastically different. The monkey was a little taller than Shikamaru’s 176 centimeters. In contrast, the cat didn’t even reach his shoulder.

So the monkey’s a man, the cat’s a woman... It was clear from their builds.

“Take your masks off,” Kakashi said, and both reached up to their faces. The white monkey and cat’s faces were peeled off like thin skins, revealing the human faces below.

It was an Anbu custom to wear the white masks of animals. Because the bulk of the work they did was behind the scenes and dark even compared with other missions—things like assassinations and schemes and fomenting unrest in other countries—they had an almost visceral dislike of their identities being known.

The majority of people in the village had no idea who belonged to the Anbu. There were any number of stories about everyday people nonchalantly going about their everyday business actually being members of the Anbu.

“The man is Ro. The woman is Soku.”

As Kakashi spoke, the two Anbu ninja turned toward Shikamaru and bowed slightly in greeting.

“A girl this age—”

“Like, unthinkable,” Soku said, cutting Shikamaru’s muttering off. “In the world of the shinobi, ability is, like, everything. I won my seat with the Anbu through my own, like, abilities.”

“Exactly right,” Kakashi agreed.

It wasn’t hard to see why Shikamaru was surprised. Soku was childish. He was certain she was at least five or six years younger than he was; he wouldn’t have been surprised to learn that she had only just left the academy. Her cheeks, still cherubically plump, were somewhat red, and her thin lips were firmly pursed in a way that made him feel the tenaciousness of her will. Her fine eyebrows were raised at a severe angle, the eyes below them shining with fiery self-confidence. Her face vaguely reminded him of Temari when they were little.

“Not long after Hinoko left the academy, we noticed her talents and scouted her for the Anbu. She’s only fourteen, but she’s already been on a number of missions, and people inside the Anbu have total faith in her.”

“It’s not good to judge people on how they, like, look. And Lord Hokage, I told you not to call me by my real, like, name,” Soku said, puffing up her cheeks a little.

“Hinoko... That’s a really cute na—” he said, and Soku disappeared. In the blink of an eye, an orange nail touched his forehead, and he caught his breath.

“I, like, *hate* being called by my name. I’d like you to be careful about that.” Soku’s index fingers pressed between his eyebrows crackled with static, sounding like an extreme miniature of Kakashi’s Lightning Blade. Chakra burst from the top of her finger.

“Behave yourself, Soku,” said the man who had been wearing the monkey mask.

His name’s Ro...

Thick eyebrows, square jaw, he glared at Soku with stubborn, single-lidded eyes.

“This kind of thing is, like, key in the beginning. The one thing I’m, like, not interested in is being written off as a kid.”

“Sorry. I’ll be careful from now on.” Shikamaru apologized. There was no need to make this situation worse, not to mention that he had no time to indulge the girl’s obstinacy.

Soku shook her head, orange hair tied up on top of it, and shifted her gaze from Ro back to Shikamaru. “As long as you understand.” Leaving her back carelessly wide open, Soku stomped over to her original position and clasped her hands behind her once more.

“Ro is able to freely change the amount and quality of chakra in himself, and in anyone he targets,” Kakashi said, and Ro nodded slightly.

“Does that mean you can actually increase chakra?”

“Sharp question,” Kakashi noted.

“It’s a modification of the chakra from the point of view of what others perceive. Thus, even if my humble self were to multiply Lord Shikamaru’s chakra, your actual fighting power would not be any greater. A misapprehension would simply be generated in anyone with a perception of you. In other words, mine art takes no form without the relationship between the two opponents.”

He had a slightly old way of speaking. Combined with his craggy look, he came off like a samurai.

“So you’re able to change the amount of chakra,” Shikamaru said, nodding in agreement with Ro’s explanation. “Does that mean it’s possible to eliminate it completely?”

“It is.” Ro looked to be over forty from any angle; he had to have been at least

twenty years older than Shikamaru. “It is also possible to allow you to determine any target and thoroughly sniff out the quality and amount of the target’s chakra.” Words like “sniff out” felt fairly out of place coming from this man and his formal speech.

“I think this is the optimal jutsu for hiding?” Kakashi interjected.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. And the young lady here?” Shikamaru said, looking at Soku. The phrase “young lady” made her thin shoulders twitch upward. Apparently, she hadn’t managed to fully shed her childish self just yet. He couldn’t tell yet if this would be a strength or a weakness for this shinobi.

“Maybe it’s better if you just show him?” Kakashi said.

Soku nodded before turning her back to Shikamaru. The index finger of her raised right hand pointed out through the open window behind Kakashi. Shikamaru’s eyes noticed a sparrow flying along at the end of the invisible line extending from that finger. “My weapon is a chakra needle,” Soku murmured, as a flash of orange light shot out of her hand.

The sparrow was perfectly hidden in the shadow of the large pillar between windows. There was no way Soku could hit it if she released her chakra at that moment. Her chakra would hit the pillar instead and cut into the wall.

But no mark appeared on the pillar. And yet the sparrow outside emitted a high-pitched cry.

Shikamaru raced over to the window. Leaning forward, he stared at the ground below the area where the sparrow had been flying. The sparrow appeared to be dead.

“Appreciate it if you didn’t, like, get the wrong idea. I don’t, like, needlessly take lives,” Soku said, standing behind him. At the same time, the sparrow abruptly got up and danced off high into the sky. “Pierced the bit the chakra activates, so that sparrow’s several times livelier than it was before.”

“What about the wall?” Shikamaru asked, taking his hand off the windowsill and turning around.

The girl, still not finished growing to her full height, licked her thin pink lips while grinning innocently. “Once I aim and set my target, even if it leaves my

field of vision, the chakra needle will, like, follow it wherever it goes. My needle won't stop until it pierces its target."

With Ro's jutsu, they would erase their chakra, sometimes transforming it while infiltrating the enemy. And once they got nice and close to Gengo, Shikamaru would seal his movements with his own Suffocating Darkness. Then Soku could determine her target and deal the killing blow with her chakra needle.

It would be fine. They could do this.

"Can I ask one thing?" he said to Soku, as she looked up at his face and the daring smile spreading across his lips.

"Like, what?"

"Can you do something about that 'like, like' thing?"

∞

They're coming...

Them.

The Oto ninja.

Orochimaru's underlings.

No...

When did they start chasing me?

I'm the one chasing them.

There are people I have to save.

Uchiha Sasuke.

That creep manages to do everything perfectly.

But he's still my comrade.

I am totally going to save him.

It's my first time in charge. Failure is not allowed.

My friends...

My friends are being killed.

Choji.

Kiba.

Neji.

And Naruto...

I'm the only one left.

I'm surrounded by Oto ninja.

They're sneering at me.

I'm sorry...

Everyone, I'm sorry.

I won't fail again next time.

So please, don't die.

"Please!"

Awakened by his own echoing shout, Shikamaru practically leapt up from his futon, his whole body drenched in sweat.

A dream. His first mission after passing the chunin selection exams. The mission in which he had rescued Uchiha Sasuke when he was about to go rogue due to Orochimaru's machinations. Joining him were his classmates and Neji. As they pursued Sasuke, his friends dropped away one after another until, in the end, Shikamaru himself chose to entrust everything to Naruto for the final battle with the Oto ninja. As a result, Sasuke left the village, and all of his friends were injured. The first mission he had faced as a chunin, as a leader, ended in failure.

He put his palm to a forehead wet with sweat and took a slow, deep breath.

Why a dream like that? He had never actually seen that scene before, although the scars in his heart from that time still lingered even now. Whenever he fell to criticizing himself, it was the one incident he always remembered as his own greatest disgrace. He had never been backed into a corner the way he had been then.

Dreams were supposedly the manifestation of the deep psyche.

So then, am I being backed into a corner?

“It’s okay. It’ll be fine, Shikamaru.” Uncharacteristically reassuring thoughts turned into words spilling from his mouth of their own accord. His heart hammered in his chest. It didn’t look like he’d be getting back to sleep tonight.

He departed when the sun rose in the morning.

6

A group of boys, about ten years old, passed by, laughing in sunny voices from the bottoms of their stomachs. Behind them, a man in his thirties with a grim look on his face hurried along to somewhere. The children were probably going to the academy, the man to work. In front of an early-opening deli tucked in a corner of the road, a number of women who appeared to be housewives were chatting animatedly.

The usual morning, the usual scene.

Shikamaru walked through the peaceful early village toward the Hokage's office. The main road led from the A-un main gates—the entryway to the village—straight to the Hokage Residence. The road ended square at the Residence, behind which was the monument with the faces of the Hokage carved into it.

Shikamaru, however, was not going to the Hokage Residence.

A shinobi who has been given a mission would normally slip out of the village through the A-un main gates. It wasn't a rule per se; it just naturally happened that way. However, the Anbu were different. Given that the members of the Anbu were frequently assigned top-secret missions, they used the back gates, in a corner of the monument behind the Hokage Residence, so that they could leave without being spotted by the people of the village.

Shikamaru was headed toward those back gates. His current mission was a secret from the villagers. Kakashi and a few top-level people were the only ones who knew about it, besides Shikamaru himself, and Ro and Soku, who he was taking with him.

He left it to Kakashi to deal with things after he was gone from the village. The Hokage would tell the villagers he had gone out on some alliance business. He would leave without anyone knowing, and he would return the same way. That was the idea.

"Hmm?" Shikamaru's eyes caught something as he hurried toward the back gates.

A yellow-haired man.

Who also noticed Shikamaru.

“Hey! It’s Shikamaru! Where’re you going in such a hurry, huh?” The man raced over to Shikamaru, a smile spreading across his lips so childish it was hard to believe they were the same age. Three lines on either cheek, crystal-clear blue eyes.

“I could say the same thing to you. What’re you up to so early, Naruto?” Shikamaru called the man by name.

Uzumaki Naruto.

The hero who guided the last Great War to an end, the son of the fourth Hokage. Not long after he was born, Nine Tails had been sealed inside his body, and from the time he was a small boy, he had been viewed with prejudice. Despite this, the boy had had his sights set on becoming Hokage and had never once faltered from that path. And now, Naruto was at the top of the list of candidates to be the Hokage after Kakashi.

“I couldn’t really sleep last night, y’know? And I woke up early, so I went and had some ramen at Ichiraku. Just on my way home now.”

“Are they even open this early?”

“They’re open twenty-four hours now,” Naruto said, gleefully.

“That doesn’t mean you have to go and eat ramen, of all things, first thing in the morning.”

“I could eat ramen breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“That’s not something to brag about, y’know.”

“Half my body’s made of ramen,” Naruto noted proudly, with a straight face.

A sigh naturally slipped out of Shikamaru’s mouth. “You know, you’re the hero who ended the Great War now. Think about your health for five seconds.”

“The hero thing’s the hero thing; ramen is ramen!”

“I don’t get that logic at all.”

“Heh heh heh!”

The figure before him, laughing as he rubbed at his nose, hadn’t changed in

the slightest from their days at the academy. Naruto lived in a straightforward way, as genuine as ever. His forthrightness had changed the people around him and had changed his own self. Naruto, the black sheep of the village, gradually earned more and more friends via his pure heart, and in the end even saved his close friend Uchiha Sasuke, after that friend had fallen to the depths of darkness and cursed everything in this world.

All this was no mean feat. Or rather, it was a stunt no one other than Naruto could pull off.

Upfront and honest, Naruto had cherished since childhood the dream of one day becoming Hokage. From the time when no one would have anything to do with him, back when he was all attention-seeking mischief, he had insisted and continued to insist that he was going to be Hokage. In the beginning, no one believed him. But now, everyone in the village thought the next Hokage could be no one other than Naruto.

Naruto was the sun. In his body, he housed an inexhaustible flame, a blinding, shining sun. Anyone bathed in that passion opened their heart and became his friend.

Shikamaru was certain Naruto would keep pushing ahead, just like he always had. And it would actually happen. Someday, he would become Hokage, and his light would grow and grow, bathed in the confidence of the villagers.

But because of its light, the sun did not know the shadows. On more than one occasion along the way, Naruto had fought people held prisoner by the darkness, but it had never bent him. Naruto fought with the belief that no matter how far a person might have fallen, their heart would inevitably seek the light. Shikamaru had seen this unwavering faith change any number of enemies.

Whatever darkness he found himself in, he never lost his light. Which was why, in the truest sense, Naruto did not know the shadows.

There was, however, a darkness in people that could never be eradicated. No leader could ever save everyone. However large the hand that lifted them up, some would always slip through the gaps between the fingers. There were certain things in this world no one could change.

But Naruto didn't think so. No matter how impossible the situation might

appear, he never gave up on his quest to save everyone. Naruto was that kind of man.

And Shikamaru thought that was the man Naruto should be. Genuine and straightforward in the face of any and everything, Naruto should continue to be the sun.

When the light is strong, the shadows are also strong. Someone had to bear the burden of those shadows.

Shikamaru felt like that was his role. There was really no one more perfect for the job, given that his own specialty was manipulating shadows.

Naruto would be the Hokage, and Shikamaru would be Naruto's officer. That was Shikamaru's dream: to always be by Naruto's side, to pick up the shadows slipping through the gaps in Naruto's light.

Once his thoughts got to this point, everything came together for him. Why was he so insistent on volunteering to go to the Land of Silence himself?

For Naruto's sake.

If the Land of Silence became any stronger than it already was, Naruto would definitely suffer. The Land of Silence would emerge as Naruto's greatest nemesis. So, best to nip it while it was still in the bud. And since Shikamaru had decided to be responsible for Naruto's shadows, it was only natural that he be the one to nip the bud of that obstacle.

"What're you doing?" Naruto asked.

"Taking a walk."

"So early in the morning?"

"I think a walk's way more morning than eating ramen."

"True."

They both laughed.

"You got the day off?" Shikamaru asked, after a while.

"As if. *Someone somewhere* always comes along with some annoying mission. I haven't had a day off in six months. I'm out on another mission this

afternoon.”

“Someone somewhere” was Shikamaru.

“I get those missions for your own sake. Quit all your grumbling and just do them.”

“I just want a little time off at least.”

“You’re a candidate for the next Hokage. People are watching you. This is the most important time in your life. Have some self-awareness.”

“I know, I know. But, you know.”

“No buts,” Shikamaru said, as if speaking to a sulking child. “Everyone in the village recognizes your ability now. Which is exactly why you need to perform as many missions as you can and make them all think, ‘Yeah, it’s Naruto or no one.’ It’s been almost two years since the Great War. If you think they’re going to approve you just because you’re the hero who ended the war, think again.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Naruto pursed his lips before opening his mouth wide in a yawn. “My belly’s full now. Maybe I’ll go home and sleep a bit again.”

“Don’t oversleep.”

“Yup.” Naruto grinned broadly, eyes narrowing, and walked past Shikamaru.

“Hey! Naruto!” Shikamaru called over his shoulder.

“Hmm?” Naruto said, absently, turning around.

“You’re gonna be Hokage. Don’t forget.”

“I never stopped saying it. That’s my ninja path.”

“You mean *our* ninja path.”

“Yeah.”

Waving his right arm in broad sweeps, Naruto turned and started walking again. After taking a moment to watch his friend’s back move away from him, Shikamaru started walking too.

“I’ll make you Hokage.”

Shikamaru promised not to stop saying it either; he was determined.

“Sorry to make you wait,” he said to Ro and Soku in front of him. Their mission now was to infiltrate the village and assassinate the target, a job that couldn’t be carried out with covert activities alone, so neither of them were wearing their masks. “Get intel on the actual situation in the Land of Silence. Find Sai and the members of the Anbu we’ve lost contact with. But our top priority is to assassinate Gengo.”

Both shinobi nodded silently.

No one was there to see them off, not even Kakashi. It was just the three of them standing at the deserted rear gate, with its grove of trees at the base of the monument, damp and gloomy even in the daytime.

“We’re doing an *assassination*, so *exssamination* is unnecessary, hm,” Ro said, with excessive emphasis on “examination,” as he flared the large nostrils in his eagle’s beak of a nose.

Shikamaru stared, perplexed, completely missing whatever Ro was trying to say.

“You bomb so badly, like, it’s almost funny,” Soku said, almost apologetically, and Ro grew flustered. Sweat sprang up around the corners of his eyes. Soku shifted her gaze from her awkward partner over to Shikamaru. “This old guy meant examination like reconnaissance. He basically tried to force a pun between assassination and examination. Sometimes, he gets all weird with wordplay. You gotta, like, watch out.”

Shikamaru swallowed the question of what exactly he was supposed to watch out for and cleared his throat. He pulled himself together and spoke to the pair once more. “Run without stopping when you’re out the gates. Got it?”

“Like, got it,” Soku replied, somewhat gleefully, while next to her, Ro nodded, cheeks blazing red.

“Okay, let’s go then,” Shikamaru said, and yanked open the gate, so small it would just barely allow two people walking abreast to pass through.

Temari stared at the dark crimson hair swinging in the wind. He might have been her own little brother, but she could still admit that he was actually getting to be good-looking.

She was standing behind him on what the villagers called the “wind-reading hill,” which offered an unbroken view of Sunagakure. Temari knew her brother’s sole moment of respite came from looking out over the village from this hill where the wind blew endlessly year-round.

“You need something, sis?” he said, turning just his face toward her. The character “love” was carved into his smooth, sleek forehead.

Gaara of the Desert.

The people of the village had trembled upon hearing that name until a few years earlier. And now? He was the leader of Sunagakure and an authority within the alliance. He was essential to the world of the ninja, all thanks to Naruto.

Having housed a tailed beast within himself from a young age like Naruto, Gaara firmly believed that he could only love himself and that everyone else was an enemy; he would have nothing to do with anyone, even his own sister Temari or his older brother Kankuro. The Gaara of that time refused to let them into his heart. He had no mercy even for his sister and brother. If he didn’t like someone, he would kill them. He didn’t have to express his rage in words; the intense bloodlust radiating from his entire body amply communicated the message.

The only one who had ever seriously gone up against him and those ideas of his had been Naruto.

Naruto never gave up on Gaara; they had both been forced into lives as jinchuriki, after all. After a deadly battle exceeding any human framework, the two gradually came to respect one another. When the Akatsuki had pulled the tailed beast from her brother’s body, Naruto had ungrudgingly shared his own chakra with the dying boy. Gaara saw Naruto as a friend.

It was then that her brother had started to change.

His awkward personality evolved slowly, bit by bit. The way he spoke to and interacted with Temari and Kankuro changed, his attitude toward the villagers changed, and his feelings toward people from other villages changed too. And then all those people came to accept Gaara.

She was truly grateful to Naruto, and she thought warmly of his birthplace of Konohagakure. The people of that village were extremely proud as shinobi; most were unshakable.

Abruptly, *his* face jumped to life in the back of her mind. Clicking her tongue lightly, Temari felt a stinging pain deep in her chest.

“What’s the matter, sister?”

“Oh, uh.” Temari stood next to Gaara. In his worried eyes shone a clear light. His earnestness—a younger brother caring for his big sister—was almost painful to her. Before she knew it, Temari was averting her eyes.

Sunagakure was always dry. It was in the middle of the desert; it never rained. The sharp wind carried more than a few grains of sand.

“I just got some sand in my eye.”

“That’s strange. Not like you at all.”

“I-I guess so.”

Those born in Sunagakure were accustomed to dealing with sand and wind. Sand did not hit them in the eye. Getting sand in her eye was just an excuse.

“Shikamaru...” *His* name suddenly came from Gaara’s mouth, and Temari couldn’t stop herself from stiffening up in surprise. Rather than questioning why the name would make his sister freeze up so dramatically, Gaara continued matter-of-factly: “He’s been weird lately. Whenever I see him at the alliance headquarters, I get the feeling that his heart isn’t in it. Maybe he’s been working a little too hard.”

“So you think so too.”

Gaara nodded. “I couldn’t view people in a favorable light until a few years ago, but now I feel like it’s the opposite. I’m deeply concerned about everyone’s

behavior and well-being. I think I'm probably extra sensitive to the workings of other people's minds."

Her little brother had always been serious at heart. If he believed in something, he followed through mind, body, and soul. Once he decided to open his heart, he did so unreservedly, with the utmost thoroughness. So it was no surprise that he would have noticed minuscule changes in Shikamaru.

"He's hiding something."

"Mm-hmm," Temari agreed.

"He thinks more seriously than anyone else about the alliance and the future of ninja. I don't think he'd do anything to hurt the alliance."

Gaara was talking about the fact that all the hidden villages in the alliance had an obligation to report any national or international matters or problems that might have an effect on the entire organization. Temari also saw that Shikamaru was withholding some not-insignificant matter happening within Konohagakure, something even a man like him was unable to hide completely. She thought it likely that whatever it was, it was going to end up being a problem for all ninja.

"Can you think of anything it might be?"

Temari was the one within the alliance who worked with Shikamaru the most, which was why her brother was asking her. "It's not that I can't, but...I can't be sure."

Still silent, Gaara nodded.

"He's been fairly seriously investigating the missing shinobi and rogue ninja from the Great War."

Gaara shifted his gaze from Temari to look out at the village once more. A crease formed between his eyebrows. He was thinking.

Suddenly, the wind got stronger. The sand hitting her face hurt.

"Maybe I'll ask Naruto," Gaara muttered. "Will you go for me, sister?"

"Sure." Temari was surprised at how bright her voice sounded.

“I could ask Kakashi directly, but he’d no doubt give me the runaround,” Gaara continued. “So we’ll ask Naruto about Shikamaru first. If it turns out he’s facing some unusual or difficult situation, we have to do everything in our power to help. They can use as many of the shinobi of Sunagakure as they need.”

“Shikamaru is a Konoha ninja, right?”

“The era of drawing lines between Suna and Konoha is over. We need him in the alliance. It’s only natural that we help him.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s nothing for you to thank me for, sis.”

Temari bowed her head, and tears fell from her eyes. She raised her face again and smiled at Gaara as she wiped them away.

“The sand is really getting in your eyes today, hm?”

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“C’mon, hey! Sakura, you listening to me?” Naruto said, elbows resting on the mountain of books piled so high they reached his chest. Supporting a sullen face with both hands, he stared at Sakura’s back while she raced around busily along the bookshelves lining one wall. “Haven’t seen Sai in more than a month already, and that jerk Shikamaru was seriously ice cold. So c’mon, you guys hiding something from me or what?”

“We’re not!” she shouted, hackles raised, her words smacking the pout off of Naruto’s face. “Don’t you have a mission or something?”

“I’m done for today.”

“Well then, just go and eat your ramen at Ichiraku, go home, go to bed!”

“Whaaaat? But I mean, you haven’t been at the Hokage Residence in ages, and I came all the way over just to say hi. That is a seriously cold attitude for a former Team Seven member, y’know.” Naruto pursed his lips and looked at Sakura.

She stopped in front of him and glared, hands on hips. “I am incredibly busy right now working with Lady Tsunade to systematize medical ninjutsu and build

an organization within the alliance! I just came today to get the materials Lady Tsunade left here when she was Hokage! I don't have time for this! Not to mention I'm doing all this in my private time! I only have time after I'm done with my missions. I'm actually really busy! Which is why I don't have time to listen to your dumb stories! Okay?!"

No sooner were the words out of her mouth than she had turned back to the bookshelves. "What's happening with you and Hinata lately anyway? Wouldn't she be way more willing to listen to you than I would?"

"What? You jealous?"

Racing back over to him, Sakura rapped Naruto on the head. He dropped headfirst to his knees on the stone floor, and Sakura stared down at him, face twisted up in demonic rage. "As if I would be jealous! I have Sasuke, you know!"

"R-right," Naruto responded, staying down. His eyes, which had been so completely relaxed until that moment, took on a hard look. Sensing this, Sakura turned serious as well. "But, you know, lately, I've had a really bad feeling."

"The tailed beast in you acting up?"

Nine Tails still resided within Naruto, along with the vestiges of the other eight tailed beasts. Naruto's body was, in a manner of speaking, the jinchuriki for Ten Tails. In the last Great War, after becoming the jinchuriki for Ten Tails, Obito had gained a power rivaling that of the Sage of Six Paths, the founder of ninjutsu. And in keeping the tailed beast within his body, Naruto also housed a part of the abilities of the Sage of Six Paths.

Sakura knew that Naruto's "bad feeling" was something different from what a regular person would feel.

"It's nothing about the tailed beasts. It's just this feeling I have, y'know?"

"So then maybe you're just imagining things?"

"That's cold... You're basically giving me zero credit?" Still on the floor, Naruto started sulking again.

"I know you're worried is all. You can't help it. But Sai and Shikamaru are both amazing ninja. If they really needed your help, they would ask for it, and even if

they didn't, Lord Hokage would come and tell you."

"Whaaaaat? You can't trust Master Kakashi, okay?"

"He's way better than you!"

Sakura sent an explosive kick flying toward Naruto's backside. His body shot into the air and came up perpendicular against the wall. Dropping into a fighting crouch, Naruto looked at her with something like fear.

"Quit blabbing at me and go take care of your own work. That's what Sai and Shikamaru want too. Especially Shikamaru. He's working insanely hard in the alliance and in the village to make you Hokage, you know. You better not let him down."

"I know all that. That's exactly why I'm worried about them, okay?"

Sakura sighed. "Get it together. You think so highly of these friends of yours. They're not going to do anything stupid and end up dead."

"Dead?! Don't say stuff like that! Knock on wood!"

"Oh, come on! I say one thing, and you come back with something else. Seriously annoying!" Sakura mimicked Naruto's own way of speaking. "Go home and go to bed!"

Flying kick.

Soaring through the air, Naruto broke the door and exited the room.

Watching him go, Sakura smiled and waved a hand.

**The Land
of Silence**

The Land of Silence

1

After running for three days and nights, Shikamaru and his team arrived in the Land of Silence.

The Land of Silence was a small nation on the western edge of the continent. About 70 percent of the land was surrounded by mountains and forest, while the plains that made up the remaining 30 percent dotted the various regions of the country. The towns built on these plains were village-sized at best. For the three ninja, coming from Konohagakure in the Land of Fire, one of the five great nations, this nation seemed like nothing more than rustic countryside.

The village of Tobari, the capital of the Land of Silence, was in the middle of the country. Once they crossed the border, Shikamaru and his team slipped through hills and fields to arrive there near the evening on the fourth day after leaving Konoha.

Although it was a poor country, the village at its heart did have a certain urban air to it. Unlike the straw roofs of the houses in the other villages they had seen, even the smallest of the houses in Tobari had wonderful tiled roofs. There were also many buildings of reinforced concrete, and the town was neatly arranged into sections.

The streets were in the shape of a spiderweb. On land subdivided into layers of concentric circles with roads radiating outward from the center, civilian homes and apartment buildings stood side by side. At the center of these circles was a conspicuously large building. When seen from outside the village, this building alone protruded from the cluster of homes and other structures. Rising up a dozen or more floors, the building was adorned with deep red roofs to demarcate each story, with a gold lion at every corner of the dazzling tiled roof coloring the top floor.

“It would appear that this structure is this land’s castle.”

“Quit with the smug observations. Like, we can all see that it is.”

Walking along a large road that led into the heart of the village, Shikamaru listened to his companions with one ear as he looked up at the castle.

They had long since taken off their Konoha ninja gear. When the customs of the country changed, so did the ninja gear. For the gear they would need to sneak into the village, the two members of the Anbu had proposed that local procurement would be best, and he had agreed, so they had slipped into the wealthiest-looking mansion in a village along the way to Tobari and found some clothing they could change into.

They closed robes at the chest, tightened *obi* belts at the hip, and wore something like wide *hakama* trousers on their lower halves, stuffing these into knee-high knit boots and tucking in the hems. This was apparently the dress of the Land of Silence. The robe was extremely staid, without the slightest hint of a pattern or design. And it wasn't that the robes Shikamaru and his team had stolen happened to be plain; the people walking through the village of Tobari were also all in sober colors, browns and blacks and grays.

The signs of the shops were also subdued in color, with not a hint of anything resembling neon. It was a city, but there was none of a city's vibrancy.

"Do you gain a sense of it, Lord Shikamaru?" Ro said, walking in front of him. Shikamaru walked, wedged between the two members of the Anbu, who excelled at infiltration. Ro was guarding the front.

Ro's question was just too vague. With no limit on exactly what he should be sensing, he couldn't answer. When he stayed silent, Ro answered his own question, as though he had had it ready right from the start.

"There is no sign of any subordinates who would be serving the daimyo."

"You're right about that."

As they spoke, their feet carried them directly toward the castle. They didn't have any particular aim in heading in that direction. Their feet simply turned toward the largest building. They wouldn't be foolish enough to recklessly charge into it or anything like that.

"It is only citizens who stroll through the town. That we could come this far and see nothing of attendants is mysterious," Ro announced in his peculiarly

old-fashioned way, an observation that was quite accurate.

The daimyo were the ones actually ruling over the nations of the continent; the ninja never stood on the public stage of government. It was only natural that the daimyo would have their residence in the village at the center of that nation, and that the daimyo's stronghold would be home to any number of attendants taking care of the daimyo. And attendants who served the daimyo were distinct from ordinary citizens. They were more splendidly adorned than the average person, with a slightly haughty demeanor. It was strange that they hadn't seen any such attendants as they walked through the town.

"Maybe there's, like, no daimyo," Soku whispered. Some of the smaller nations had no actual daimyo; they ran their governments through citizen conferences.

But this nation was not one of those. Certain of this fact, Shikamaru kept his eyes on the castle as he spoke, not looking back at Soku behind him. "Sai's report said this country's ruled by a man named Gengo."

"Maybe he's, like, not a daimyo."

"Right." Shikamaru caught sight of a man up ahead of them with a sharp gaze and clad in a long jet-black coat. His look was clearly different from the garb of the Land of Silence that Shikamaru and his team were wearing. His clothing resembled that worn by the Akatsuki, but his coat did not have the red cloud design, nor a collar that hid the neck up to the mouth like the coats of the Akatsuki. The closure was different from those fasteners too, with five large buttons decorated with silver attachments in a line from neck to waist. "Don't you think we've come across a fair number dressed like that guy?"

"I would state that I have also noticed this fact."

"Is it normal to just jump on board with whatever anyone says after the fact?"

"That look... That look is mayhap our target."

"Like, shut up. Seriously, old man."

Shikamaru ignored Soku's jab and continued. "You ever see that guy before, Ro?"

Shikamaru turned his eyes on the couch set up on the red carpet in front of a tea shop in the corner of the street. Ro glanced back over his shoulder briefly before turning his face toward the tea shop, as if following Shikamaru's gaze. "It cannot be."

"Huh?! What d'you mean? I, like, don't follow."

"So you have, huh?" Shikamaru let Soku's words slide by and spoke to Ro. "You've seen him before."

The two looked at the man sitting on the couch, spine ramrod straight, drinking tea with his eyes closed. He, too, was wearing a long coat. The man called for someone in the shop. An elderly man, apparently the shop owner, came out, bobbing his head up and down over and over in a bow. The way he deprecated himself to the point of servility was the manner of a citizen currying favor with a daimyo or one of his attendants.

"That is Minoichi, who was a member of the Anbu."

"That man—"

"He was, like, supposed to have gone missing in the Great War," Soku muttered, cutting Shikamaru off. The three of them averted their eyes to prevent Minoichi from noticing them and passed by the tea shop.

"This'd all be way faster if I just asked him directly." Fireworks shot off in his heart, and the corners of Shikamaru's mouth turned upward naturally.

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"Don't go moving anymore," Shikamaru said matter-of-factly to the man grinding his teeth, face tensed far more than necessary. They were in a cul-de-sac.

Shikamaru had deliberately chosen a place between reinforced concrete buildings that was damp and clammy even during the day; not a soul was around.

Ro and Soku were on lookout at the entrance to the cul-de-sac. Anbu masters who had infiltrated any number of places, the pair hid themselves in the shadow of a building and held their breath as they concentrated all their

attention on the road, as darkness more intense than the gloom of the building's shadow oozed out from Shikamaru's feet. Crawling out from either foot, the darkness twined itself around the body of the man before him, creeping along the ground like two inky snakes. The snakes wound themselves around the man's torso before changing shape into an enormous hand, the fingers of which were slowly approaching the man's neck.

Suffocating Darkness.

The House of Nara that Shikamaru had been born into was a family that had, for generations, excelled in the art of manipulating shadows. Suffocating Darkness was a jutsu that bound his opponent's movements with his own shadow, a shadow that had physical power. Thus, not only was his enemy's body restrained, he could also inflict damage directly.

"I could strangle you with my shadow."

"I-impossible... Why are you..."

"You know who I am?" According to Ro, this man was a ninja in the Konoha Anbu. It would have been no surprise to learn he knew of Shikamaru. "I know your name, y'know. Minoichi."

"I-I don't know that name."

"Don't play dumb with me. You're originally a Konohagakure shinobi, right?"

"I-I don't know what you're talking about."

He put more strength into his shadow as it crawled along Minoichi's body. The hand-shaped shadow hovering around his neck latched on to his Adam's apple.

"Kaah!" Minoichi cried out in anguish.

"If you were born in Konoha, then naturally you're aware of just what I can do with this jutsu of the House of Nara, aren't you?"

I could keep tightening this noose and kill you. That was the implied threat.

"What are you doing in here dressed like that?"

"I-I'm not a ninja anymore," Minoichi said in a hoarse voice, glaring at

Shikamaru. “I’m a revolutionary. All of you living your idle lives in the stagnant world of the ninja couldn’t possibly understand our noble intentions.”

“What kind of nonsense is this? I’m asking you what a ‘revolutionary’ is, got it?” The shadow fingertips tightened their grip.

“Ngh!” Minoichi groaned.

“I don’t care if I end up strangling you to death, y’know,” he spat, feeling like he might throw up himself. His heart was being invaded by darkness.

“Even if I did explain it, you wouldn’t under—Hngh!”

Shikamaru pushed the shadow into the Adam’s apple with an added burst of strength. “If you’re just going to talk garbage, then I really will do you in.” His pupils were wide open as he stared at Minoichi.

“U-understood...”

“Don’t you mean ‘understood, sir’?”

“Understood, sir...”

Shikamaru eased his shadow grip, and Minoichi coughed violently with teary eyes.

“Now, answer. What’s a revolutionary? You guys used to be shinobi. What are you trying to do now?”

Minoichi’s eyes darted in confusion at the rapid-fire questions. He looked at Shikamaru’s cool face, instantly grasped that not a single wasted word would be permitted, and took a deep breath before starting to talk in a rush.

“This nation is ruled by us, the revolutionaries. There are none of such humble birth as the daimyo here. Revolutionary is the title used for those who were once shinobi, but who have since had their eyes opened by Lord Gengo’s divine will. Our objective, together with Lord Gengo, is a true revolution in this world. No matter what you shinobi might plan, you are powerless before Lord Gengo. Whatever you might hear from me, however you might try to learn the truth of this land, it is in vain,” Minoichi said, and laughed.

“No!”

Minoichi slammed his jaw shut in an attempt to bite off his own tongue.

No.

Before his teeth could finish the job, something shot through Minoichi's neck.

"I pierced the chakra point to make his whole body go to sleep. He'll be out for, like, three days. Won't be able to move," Soku said, having come up to stand behind him at some point. "Revolutionary, huh? Thinks he's, like, fancy or something. Totally, like, creepy." Pursing her lips, Soku stared down at Minoichi on the ground, his face peaceful as if he were truly asleep.

2

Shikamaru didn't try to suppress his shivers at the chill reaching him through the concrete floor. The windowless walls and the ceiling were all also concrete. The three of them sat in a circle in the dark gray space. They were all wearing the long coats of the revolutionaries, all of them stolen. The room they sat in had belonged to one of the coat owners as well. That owner was unconscious in the closet in the next room, having been hit with Soku's chakra. They had interrogated them when they stole the coats, and had learned a number of things.

"The situation seems to be precisely as you had surmised, Lord Shikamaru." It was Ro who got the ball rolling. "This land does indeed appear to be governed by this Gengo, an intensely charismatic man, by all accounts."

Ro said "intensely charismatic," and Shikamaru was of the same opinion.

They had captured two male revolutionaries—including Minoichi—for coats for Shikamaru and Ro, and one woman for Soku. Having interrogated all three, Shikamaru could say the same thing about each of them: they had a devotion to and faith in Gengo that bordered on the absurd.

Their confidence in Gengo was in a different category from the faith the shinobi of Konoha had in the Hokage or in Naruto. That was based in love and adoration for another person, respect toward another human being—Shikamaru believed this was the case in Konoha with the Hokage and Naruto.

But it was different with Gengo. Shikamaru saw within the revolutionaries a powerful force, more like the fear and reverence a person might have for a god. They accepted Gengo unconditionally as a being fundamentally different from mere mortals such as themselves.

Just who was this man who could stir people up to such an extent? Shikamaru was aware that a part of him was starting to take a simple interest in the man.

"So we, like, take care of Gengo, and that's the end of it. The plan right from the start," Soku said, indifferently. "That's why me and Pops here were, like, chosen. Opposite style, there'd be, like, nothing for us to do. Opposite, it'd all

be, like, fine.” Her use of “opposite” was not quite right, but she was basically on point.

“The feelings the revolutionaries have toward this man Gengo are essentially religious.”

“I, like, totally agree,” Soku said, nodding, and raised her hand. “I mean, adoring this guy that much, must be, like, something to him.”

“What do you mean, ‘something,’ Hinoko?”

“Whoa! Shikamaru! I, like, told you not to use my name!” The ends of her slender eyebrows jumping up, Soku jabbed the end of his nose with the index finger of her right hand, orange chakra lightning glittering and crackling at the tip. “You call me by my name again and I’ll shoot!”

She forgot to toss in a *like*.

“Why? It’s a cute name—”

“I hate it!” The orange lightning crackled a little louder. “A cool name like Gorai or Shippu or Samidare would have been, like, way better!”

Even if she were a capable ninja, she was still a fourteen-or fifteen-year-old girl inside. Anyone would find her taste in preferred names childish, and Shikamaru stared at her, pushing back the laugh rising up in his throat. Perhaps mistaking his suppression of laughter for a serious look, Soku swallowed hard.

“Sorry. I didn’t know you hate your name that much. I’ll be more careful.”

“A-as long as you, like, get it...” Soku dropped her head, flustered. A map of Tobarī was spread out at her feet. It belonged to the owner of the room.

“Viewing it in this fashion, it certainly is a spiderweb, hmm?” Ro said, arms crossed.

Shikamaru also dropped his eyes to the map. In the center of the village, which spread out in concentric circles, was a picture of an enormous castle. Below it were the words Fushu Castle.

“Fushu...”

“An epithet to refer to prisoners in war or a savage tribe living in a central

area,” Ro noted.

“An epithet, huh?” As he nodded at Ro’s explanation, the gears in Shikamaru’s head kept turning. “So did Gengo give it this name then? Or was it called that before Gengo became its master?”

“The Land of Silence has long shunned involvement with other nations. Thus, we of the Konoha Anbu are also unable to speak to the name of this land’s castle.”

Shikamaru felt somehow that Gengo had named it. A gut feeling. Which was why he didn’t say anything to the other two. “Why give a name like that to the key castle in your country…”

“When they were at the center of the five great nations and the smaller neighboring nations, they themselves were in the end the savage tribe living on the borderlands. Perhaps they were being self-deprecating in using the term for themselves.”

“Maybe.”

“That’s, like, ridiculous.” Having listened quietly up to that point, Soku opened her mouth, dissatisfied. “I think it’s, like, way too demeaning, like, an announcement that they’re discriminating against themselves. I mean, you don’t think it’s weird that a bunch of backward-looking dopes like that would be trying to overthrow the foundations of the ninja world?”

She had forgotten her *like* again at the end. Soku was mad. But what was she mad at?

Probably the people of this country positioning their own selves as savages.

“Maybe you bare your teeth sometimes exactly because you’re cowardly, because you’re backward-looking?” Soku received this reply with a disgusted look. He met it head-on and continued. “The desire for revenge comes from resentment toward an opponent, after all. And you don’t necessarily have to touch someone directly to earn resentment like that, you know?”

“Well then, Lord Shikamaru, do you mean to state that the people of this land resent the other nations?”

“And that is, like, totally ridiculous,” Soku interjected again. “These revolutionaries in charge here now, I mean, they used to be ninja from other countries, though?”

It was just as Soku said. In interrogating their former coat owners, they had learned that everyone in this nation’s ruling class was originally a shinobi from another land. Some of those who had gone missing in the last Great War had made it to this country, along with the rogue ninja who had slipped away from the five great nations to the Land of Silence over the course of the last year, where they became revolutionaries and commanded the citizenry under Gengo.

Apparently, a daimyo had ruled the country at some point in the past. But then Gengo had come along and chased out this head of state, created the revolutionaries, and reformed the nation’s government from top to bottom. Governed by ninja now, the Land of Silence was currently doing well.

“If the revolutionaries resent the other countries, then that, like, means they’ve always resented their own villages.”

“Some ninja do.”

Soku expelled an angry puff of air through her nose.

Shikamaru maintained his cool tone as he pushed on. “The majority of the Akatsuki, the ones that caused the last Great War, were rogue ninja. They were people who possessed unparalleled talents, but couldn’t manage to make life in a group work for them. And they ended up hating the world of the ninja.”

When you were unhappy about the life you were forced to live, dark feelings started brewing inside you. And maybe those feelings led to a resentment of your own country. You ended up blaming your own misfortune and bad luck on the village structure and the world around you crumbling. None of it was your fault: it was the village, this world itself. Maybe once you took this emotional leap, it was only a matter of time before you turned into someone like the Akatsuki or the revolutionaries.

“Perhaps,” Ro murmured, eyes still on to the map. Shikamaru and Soku waited for him to continue. “The revolutionaries are precisely as you suggest, Lord Shikamaru, and hold within them dissatisfaction with the current state of shinobi.”

“Yeah,” Shikamaru managed to get in before Ro went on.

“And thus, they drifted to this land. However, is it not the case that the work they perform here differs in no way from their time in the world of the ninja?”

Ro was talking about how the revolutionaries put food on the table. They were former ninja. If they were so inclined, they could carry out as many ninja missions as they wanted. The revolutionaries of the Land of Silence used independent routes and hired themselves out to the various countries on the continent. They also undercut the standard prices set by the alliance. For countries with small treasuries such as the minor and midsize nations, this was a real boon. And for enormous countries like the five great nations, well, still nothing beat cheap. It was no wonder he had seen the number of requests coming in to the alliance plummet.

Ro was exactly right. These people, who had come to the Land of Silence bitter about the current state of the ninja world, were copying the ways of the ninja here. It was actually funny.

“So, like, a real revolution,” Soku muttered, slowly. She exchanged glances with Shikamaru, and then looked up at the ceiling, embarrassed, as she began moving her thin lips. “Minoichi, like, said it. He and ‘Lord Gengo’ and the others want a real revolution.”

“And that’s why they’re accepting work requests?” Shikamaru asked, and Soku nodded.

“At any rate, we must ensure that we look upon the visage of this man Gengo.”

“We, like, got a pretty good chance for that.” Soku pointed to a slender finger at the plaza in front of Fushu Castle.

“Yes. The public lecture... The ideal stage for an assassination indeed.” A crafty smile spread across the lips of the normally earnest and unaffected Ro as he looked at Shikamaru, almost as though he enjoyed killing. Shikamaru felt a keen, belated understanding that the man before him really was a member of the Anbu.

“Okay, Ro, you and me go into the plaza. We use your jutsu to mix into the

crowd. If I get the chance to stretch my shadow out to Gengo, I'll go ahead and restrain him. Soku, you slip onto the roof of a building where you can look out over the plaza, and wait for your chance. If anything about Gengo changes, let your chakra arrow fly."

Soku nodded with a malicious smile that in no way paled next to Ro's.

"I'm counting on you, Hinako."

"How many times do I, like, have to tell you to quit calling me by my name?!" Swept away by her anger, Soku leapt to her feet and looked down at Shikamaru indignantly.

"Forty times," Ro murmured.

"What?" Soku glared at Ro, all thoughts of respect for her elders gone from her head, mouth a sharp line plunging downward on either side.

But Ro did not flinch in the face of this wrath. Instead, he turned toward Soku and opened his mouth. "The four of the character 'shi' in Shikamaru, and the zero of 'maru.' Th-that makes forty times."

"And what happened to the 'ka,' huh old man?!"

Ro hid behind their number-named leader, nimbly dodging Soku's kick. It was almost sad how he shrank himself, the old man past forty, the old man of large stature, the old man who was, in fact, senior to the girl before him. Perhaps he was simply playing at being mischievous, but it was just too creepy for Shikamaru. He couldn't bring himself to turn around and actually look at the ninja behind him.

"Is it actually going to be okay tomorrow?" he asked the pair with a sigh.

"It'll, like, be fine!"

"You have no cause for concern!"

They answered simultaneously, Shikamaru wedged between them as they glared at each other.

He sighed yet again.

3

The square in front of Fushu Castle was jammed; Shikamaru could easily believe every person in the village was in attendance. And not just revolutionaries in their long black coats. Young, old, man, woman, people of all different classes—no distinction made between rich and poor—gathered in the plaza and waited impatiently, eager for the leading man to appear, faces all similarly lit up with passion, eyes all sparkling. They were in high spirits; the people chatting nearby were loud enough to warrant a grumpy look.

Under his long coat, Shikamaru felt his skin dampen with sweat, possibly because of the heat radiating from the people in the square. Ro was next to him. If all had gone well, Soku was hiding in a concrete building in a corner of the plaza.

Ro's jutsu had transformed Shikamaru's own chakra into that of the coat's owner, a perfect copy in quality, amount, and every other detail. Similarly, Ro was cloaked in the chakra of his own coat's owner. They both wore disguises, again thanks to Ro's skills. No matter how good a physical disguise was, an enemy could see through it quickly enough if they took a moment to closely examine the nature of the chakra hidden underneath. But Ro's jutsu took this sort of uncertainty out of the equation. A disguised chakra was difficult to take a closer look at. On top of that, they had this crowd. There was no way anyone there could see that Shikamaru and Ro were enemies of the revolution.

"For the time being, let us draw near that location," Ro said, voice hushed. He turned his eyes on the bare bones of a stage, nothing but a framework and wooden stairs to step up onto it, with nothing on top of it. There weren't even any guards, despite the fact that the crowd jostled so close they could reach out and touch the base of the structure.

"Do you believe that Gengo will truly come?" Ro asked doubtfully.

And with good reason. It was simply too dangerous for the leader of an entire nation to stand unprotected onstage. Especially a stage like this one, which seemed to boast that no one involved in its construction had given any credence to the idea that someone might target their leader's life.

“We’ll get close and wait, anyway. If it’s not Gengo, we can quietly sit it out.”

“Understood, sir.”

They just had to get within range of his Suffocating Darkness technique. Once he sealed off Gengo’s movement, Soku’s chakra would strike the final blow.

“It appears that he has arrived.”

Before Ro had even finished muttering this sentence, an enormous cheer rose up from the crowd near the stage. This rough wave spread in the blink of an eye throughout the plaza and enveloped Shikamaru. In the midst of a storm of voices so loud it threatened to rupture his eardrums, he pushed his way through the crowd toward the raised platform.

Finally, a single man appeared on it.

His jet-black coat was the same design as the revolutionaries’, but the silver-worked fasteners were much more elaborate. A pattern of countless snakes was embroidered on the sleeves in silver thread. The man’s hair was a rich indigo blue, his physique manly, jaw jutting out slightly, nose straight and sharp. The eyes that calmly looked down on the crowd housed a cool intelligence, and a slight beard grew on his chin. He was perhaps in his mid-thirties.

“I would assume that that is Gengo,” Ro muttered, without stopping.

Shikamaru kept pushing forward without responding. In his heart, however, he felt fairly certain the man before his eyes was Gengo.

The man on the stage slowly raised his right arm. Instantly, the boisterous cheering stopped. As if satisfied with this, the corners of the man’s mouth turned up slightly as he closed his eyes. He opened them again after a deep breath and began to speak with a cool composure.

“First, I thank everyone who has come together here.”

His voice was deep and heavy, and yet refreshingly clear, with a mysterious quality, as though it were seeping in through the listener’s entire body rather than through their ears. Shikamaru felt an indescribable itch, like the man’s voice was caressing his heart.

It seemed that Ro felt the same sensation; he glanced in Shikamaru’s

direction as he walked. But Shikamaru didn't meet his eyes as he quietly moved forward.

The man bowed lightly and began to speak once more. "Already ten years since I rose up in this land. Now, many likeminded souls have come together around me, and this land of ours has begun to flourish. However, not a single one of our hopes has yet been realized, not one of our wishes fulfilled."

The crowd listened in silence. When the man onstage broke off, an abnormal stillness rose up. With just a few words, the plaza had fallen completely under this man's sway.

"I want to ask all the citizens in the Land of Silence!" the man said, suddenly fierce, with no trace of his previous calm. He threw his arms out to both sides as he let forth this cry from his soul. "This land under the rule of the daimyo, and this land now—which is the better world to live in?"

"Lord Gengoooo!" The citizens raised their voices as one, enormous, loud, full of approval for the man onstage.

"It appears that we are not in error. That man is indeed Gengo," Ro said.

Shikamaru nodded and stepped toward the platform. A few more meters would bring his target within range of his Suffocating Darkness. All he had to do then was quickly restrain Gengo when a suitable moment came along.

One chance...

Gengo raised his right hand high. The citizens fell silent.

"You have shown me only too well how you feel. The power and knowledge of the daimyo pales in comparison with our own, we of ninja birth, and that dark era when we were once ruled by daimyo is over. Citizens, you are safe. Will we revolutionaries not offer you eternal protection with this power and with our very lives? Citizens, you must merely push forward undaunted and live in a sincere way. That is what we revolutionaries truly desire."

The crowd was drunk on his words. Some people were even shedding tears. It was a truly bizarre spectacle. Shikamaru was pretty sure that the speech so far did not warrant this kind of reaction. Never mind that they had only heard the introduction—Shikamaru wasn't convinced that Gengo's oratory was actually all

that good. But he had to at least admit that there was a strange power in the man's voice, a power that made itself felt by means other than the content of the speech.

"The Land of Silence is in the borderlands of the continent. The history of this nation is a history of persecution by other nations. Our ancestors did not close this land off to sever ties with others. They did it to protect us. Our nation was so weak and small that we had no choice but to close our doors to the outside world. But all that is over now."

The pressure in Gengo's voice gradually grew.

"The ones who can heal this world are not the daimyo, but us! We who hold the power of the ninja! The power of the ninja is the true justice; this alone will bring about peace for all people. It is the true nature of the world that those who excel, those who possess real power, should rule over those who do not. We have no need of daimyo or others like them who would place ninja and citizens below themselves, living solely for their own desires! Look at this nation. Ten years since we exterminated the daimyo, and our land prospers like never before." Gengo thrust his chest out.

"Soon," Shikamaru announced to Ro beside him. In a few steps, they would be within range.

"I will exterminate the daimyo from this world, and we will build a new world. Why must ninja be discriminated against? Because we have powers superior to the daimyo. Is it not because we bear powers that exceed those of mere mortals? But why must those with superior powers be persecuted? Should not excellence be championed? Even an average citizen can pull themselves upward by excelling in some way or another. It is precisely because the daimyo and their ilk fear the arrival of such a world that they discriminate against the ninja, segregate us, keep us under their thumbs. Ninja and citizens alike are victims of the desires of the daimyo."

Pressing in close, Shikamaru thought he saw blue flames flash up in Gengo's eyes.

"A revolution..."

Just one more step, and they'd be in range.

Judging from the wild enthusiasm of the people, the man before his eyes was in all likelihood Gengo himself, and Shikamaru was surprised at how smoothly they'd been able to get so close. He considered the possibility that it was a trap. But he couldn't believe that Gengo had detected them. And he couldn't even consider letting this opportunity get away.

"Akatsuki came forward to build a new world. But they were destroyed by ninja. They were destroyed by ninja locked in the old ways, content with their lot, content with discrimination, content to be controlled. And Akatsuki, after all, Akatsuki... They were nothing more than a portent of the dazzling morning. Hear me, people of the Land of Silence awaiting the dawn." Gengo spread his arms coolly, almost as if he were readying to welcome a god from the heavens. "The sunlight of a new era shines on the Land of Silence!"

The people cheered, drowning out all other sound.

The perfect chance!

Shikamaru released his shadow toward the stage. Two black snakes slithered through the framework and raced toward Gengo's feet. The moment the snakes' fangs latched on to his feet, Gengo would be unable to move, and he would lose his life to Soku's chakra. Until then, he could get as drunk as he wanted on his own words.

The snakes were at Gengo's feet. But they didn't latch on.

"Wha—!" He was sure he was within range. And yet his shadow did not extend forward.

"Little mice there." Gengo shot an icy gaze at Shikamaru.

"We are detected!" Ro shouted.

Several shadows flew up from behind Gengo. The darting darkness bent over Ro, pinning him down. "Ngh!"

Once more, Shikamaru urged his shadow toward Gengo.

"It's pointless." Gengo said, sounding callous.

Shikamaru's shadow would not obey him anymore. The shadow that he had, until that moment, been able to move like one of his own limbs, lost its target, a

kite with the string cut, and squirmed and spun on the ground.

In which case...

Shikamaru flew up onto the stage. If the plan was ruined, all that was left was direct physical combat.

Gengo didn't flinch, a thin smile playing on his lips, despite the blade closing in on him.

Shikamaru pulled out the kunai at his waist, set his sights on the other man's throat, and swung.

The instant the tips of his toes touched the platform, someone kicked Shikamaru from the side. The impact sent him tumbling along the stage before he could pull himself back up to ready his kunai, braced on one knee.

"Y-you, you're..."

A man blocked the path between Gengo and Shikamaru. He looked sick, face pale, eyes too cloudy for Shikamaru to read, mouth pulled into a straight line—an expression of his honest nature. No mistake, it was *him*.

"What are you doing..." Shikamaru called the man by name. "...Sai."

4

The brush in Sai's hand was dancing. No matter how many times Shikamaru saw a tiger appear as the tip of that brush raced along the scroll in Sai's opposite hand, he was caught off guard.

He tumbled off the stage and into the midst of the enemy. He didn't have time to concern himself with Sai at that moment. His mind was reeling: Why wasn't his jutsu working? How had his cover been blown? Was Soku all right?

Dodging enemy attacks, he turned toward Gengo once more. In the corner of his eye, he saw Ro, a dozen or more revolutionaries bearing down on and trying to pin him. The Anbu member struggled fiercely, but with that many men on top of him, resistance was all but impossible.

The claws of the tiger Sai had drawn ripped into Shikamaru's cheek. The plastic skin of his disguise peeled away limply.

"I'll get that mask off and have you feeling better in no time, okay?" Sai said, an innocent smile rising to his lips. His hand didn't stop. Several more tigers surrounded Shikamaru.

"Why are you—"

"This whole time, you've been talking like you know me."

There was no way Shikamaru could tell Sai who he was. His enemy might capture him and discover his true identity, but he could never give it up himself. It was an ironclad shinobi rule.

Beyond the swarm of revolutionaries, he could see the stage—and Gengo on it, composed, arms crossed, looking down on Shikamaru's desperate resistance.

I have to get back there. Just one more time...

He launched a kunai into the air to strike the heads of the ink tigers and flew after them. Behind him, the tigers dissolved into a spray of black ink.

He hit the ground running. An overwhelming number of enemies lay before him.

Can you make it? Shikamaru asked himself as he wove signs with both hands.

Countless shadows stretched out in all directions from his feet. It was the art of Shadow Stitching—a jutsu to pierce an opponent with a shadow transformed into a needle. He could produce an infinite number of needles, which made the technique perfect for taking on a large number of enemies.

He decided to aim for the tigers and the enemies around him. His shadows spread out in a fan formation, and after he sent up a silent prayer, they wriggled up out of the ground all at once and shot toward the enemy.

“Go!” Shikamaru shouted, a battle cry. The shadows abruptly bent up into sickles.

“Enough of this futile struggle.” Gengo’s voice slammed into Shikamaru from the stage. At that moment, the shadows hurtling forward lost all momentum and slithered back to his feet.

“W-what did you do?” he asked Gengo, with barely contained rage.

How can his voice reach this far? Who is this guy?

“Huh? I know that jutsu.” Before he knew it, Sai was standing in front of him, blocking the way. “Is that you, Shikamaru?”

“Sai, you—”

“It’s painful to watch this pointless squirming.” Sai made his brush dance even more vigorously, and an enormous white and black tiger, larger than any of the others, pulled itself up from the scroll. “You’ll understand too, soon enough.”

Sai thrust the hand clenching his brush toward Shikamaru, and taking that as its cue, the enormous tiger attacked, massive front paws high in the air.

“Bastard...” Ready himself, Shikamaru sent kunai flying at the tiger.

As he was about to leap into the air once more, something grabbed on to his right foot. And then, his left foot was caught. The revolutionaries. Robbed of his momentum, his face slammed into the ground, followed by several enemies throwing themselves on top of him.

“Someone as smart and capable as you not being able to see that the tiger was a diversion—you must be really confused.” Sai looked down on Shikamaru under a pile of the enemy, barely able to breathe.

Shikamaru saw a human figure behind Sai, slowly approaching.

Gengo.

“Take off the mask,” Gengo ordered the revolutionaries on Shikamaru’s back. A finger was jammed into the tear on Shikamaru’s cheek, and the entire layer of fake skin was peeled back.

“Well, look, it is Shikamaru, after all,” Sai said.

“So this is the genius of Konohagakure, Nara Shikamaru, hm?” Gengo said, sounding excited, as if he had found something he’d been looking for. His light-blue eyes, shining suspiciously, caught hold of Shikamaru and didn’t let go.

Smile on his lips, Shikamaru opened his mouth. “If you don’t finish me off right here and now, things’ll get scary later.”

“It’s fine. You will live with me,” Gengo said confidently, as a fist hit Shikamaru’s neck and he lost consciousness.

∞

The darkness was total, so complete he couldn’t even see his hand in front of his face. Shikamaru intently tried to focus his mind, his thoughts. He had no idea how many days had passed, but judging from the number of meals that had been brought to him and the state of his stomach, he suspected it had been five or more already.

How had this happened? No matter how many times he tried to answer this question, he couldn’t get a handle on the big picture.

The problem had occurred before Sai showed up. Shikamaru had gone up to the side of the stage where Gengo was standing and sent his shadow out. However, his shadow hadn’t been able to reach Gengo’s feet; it had somehow lost its way. And then Gengo had noticed Shikamaru and Ro. He had called the two of them mice. This, despite the fact that they had completely transformed their chakra.

The man had easily fended off their jutsu, almost as if there had been a barrier around him that rendered ninja techniques ineffective. But could Gengo really sap the power of jutsu? Shikamaru didn’t know. But he was certain that

some kind of effect had jammed both his own jutsu and Ro's.

His shadow hadn't made it to Gengo. And when he had tried to release his Shadow Stitching on Sai's beasts, his shadow abruptly lost all power. The obvious explanation was that in both instances, Gengo or some effect around him dampened the power of Shikamaru's jutsu. In all likelihood, Ro's jutsu had also lost power or been weakened, which caused Shikamaru's own chakra to mix in with that of the person he was disguising himself as and become a different chakra. It made sense that this had caught Gengo's attention.

Jutsu doesn't work on him.

Why?

There was no way that, in the brief time within which all this took place, Shikamaru could have collected exactly the information he needed to comprehend the true nature of Gengo's power. Given that he had mere scraps to scrutinize, he couldn't even come up with a guess. This irritated Shikamaru, and made him impatient.

"Ngh! Hngah!"

He could hear Ro groaning in suffering somewhere. A while ago, he had heard Soku's struggling. Apparently, they were both being held nearby. Maybe they were being tortured and beaten; the voices he heard were always groans. But for some reason, he himself wasn't being tortured.

"Sorry." He threw the word toward the groaning Ro, even though there was no way the other man would hear it.

This was the result of his own hasty actions. Maybe he should have investigated Gengo more thoroughly before attempting to carry out his plan? That couldn't have been the only chance they would have had.

He hit the cold stone floor. Over and over and over.

"Are you alive?" A voice came out of the darkness.

Gengo.

"Are you dead?" Gengo said, apparently concerned that no answer came back to him. But he had to have been aware that Shikamaru's chakra was intact. It

was just sarcasm; he knew full well Shikamaru wasn't dead. "Seems that you're eating well."

Shikamaru ate everything he was offered, after checking that it wasn't poisoned. Training to detect poison with a single lick was the most basic of basics for the shinobi.

You couldn't quit eating—as long as you were alive, an opportunity would present itself, a moment when you moved or you died with a path left untaken. A ninja never gave up on life. A true ninja survived and executed their mission no matter what. Enduring and persevering, that was a ninja.

Which was why Shikamaru believed in Ro and Soku still.

"Now that you've spent a few days shrouded in darkness, perhaps you're in the mood to be good and hear what I have to say?"

"I hate to tell you, but darkness and shadows are my friends."

"Interesting fellow," Gengo said, and laughed. "I'll come again."

His aura disappeared.

"Ngaaaaaaaah!" Ro's cries began anew.

5

The space was so vast that the Hokage's office didn't begin to compare. Shikamaru was seated somewhere near the middle of a scarlet carpet that led straight from the magnificent double doors of the entrance to the other side of the room. Handcuffs bound his hands behind him. A revolutionary stood guard on either side to keep him from standing up or doing anything they considered stupid. They too were former shinobi. If Shikamaru tried anything, they'd be on him pretty quickly.

Behind him were Ro and Soku, also in handcuffs and under guard. The one thing that was different was the bruises and cuts covering their faces. It was clear from their exhausted expressions that they had been subjected to horrible torture.

Judging from the number of meals they had brought him, ten or so days had passed. During that time, Shikamaru had not been tortured once. Gengo came to him several times, but each time he had merely rambled about nothing and soon left. He would talk about truly trivial matters like how the weather was good that day or speculate on what he would have for dinner, and then leave.

"Bow your head," the revolutionary to his right said before grabbing Shikamaru and pushing his forehead to the carpet.

"They are our valued guests. We must not treat them with violence."

He heard Gengo from far ahead of him. At the same time, the revolutionary crouching beside him to press his face into the floor stood up as if ashamed. His head got lighter.

"My subordinates were rude. Lift your head."

Before the words were in his ears, Shikamaru had lifted his face and was looking at Gengo. At the end of the red carpet were marble stairs, with another large space at the top, perhaps a quarter the size of the larger hall, where a chair sat, its long backboard a sculpture of a magnificent dragon. Gengo sat in that chair, legs crossed, left elbow on the armrest, cheek resting on the palm of his hand. He looked down on Shikamaru calmly, body angled to the left; he was

very much the ruler of this land.

“Come closer,” Gengo said, and the revolutionaries on either side of Shikamaru grabbed his arms and stood him up. They sat him down again a short distance from the stairs. The other revolutionaries did the same with Soku and Ro.

“Are you in the mood to hear what I have to say now?”

“I doubt I’ll be able to make sense of it.”

Gengo smiled slightly at Shikamaru’s declaration. A dozen or more revolutionaries filled the space around Gengo, looking down on Shikamaru with the arrogance of close aides.

Sai was among them. Dressed in a long black coat, he was the epitome of a revolutionary. As he stared down at his supposed comrade, Sai did not waver or flinch. It had always been rare for his eyes to be touched by emotion, but even so, the look in them had never been as cold as this.

“You, famous for your intelligence... You think you’ve discerned my intentions, hm?”

What does Gengo want?

He had had a gut feeling for a while now. But it was so preposterous and so completely impractical, he simply hadn’t said it out loud.

“Be one of my hands, Shikamaru. With you, I can give rise to a new world. I see in you a man capable of such a task.”

“No thanks,” he uttered promptly, glaring at Gengo with eyes shining with bloodlust.

But the master of the land met his fiery gaze coolly, with the air of a gentle breeze blowing somewhere. “I have no interest in a man who would jump to say ‘yes’ when asked to be one of my hands. That’s fine, Shikamaru.”

“Y’know, that tone of yours is really getting on my nerves. You act like you’ve seen through everything. What do you even know about me, anyway?” Shikamaru wasn’t really angry; he wasn’t foolish enough to lose his cool over something like this. He just wanted to see his opponent’s attitude when he tried

to pick a fight.

“A person can never completely know another person. Which is exactly why we are talking like this, is it not? I haven’t seen through you or anything like it. It’s only that I’ve lived just a little longer than you, so I can get a glimpse of your emotions. If this manifests as arrogance, then I apologize.”

“And I’m telling you, it’s that attitude that’s getting on my nerves.”

“I see.” Gengo lowered his eyes and smiled self-deprecatingly. And then, for a brief moment, he was silent. He let his gaze wander through empty space, clearly considering things and weighing options, before bringing it back down to Shikamaru.

He deliberately created an interval to deflect my anger...

As he made a show of thinking, Gengo was already preparing the next topic of conversation. If he had pushed ahead with their conversation without pause, Shikamaru’s response would have been forceful and hateful, full of pseudo-angry posturing. To avoid a futile exchange, Gengo deliberately paused to change the topic. He took a breath and left a moment of silence to change the air flowing between the two of them. Shikamaru could have kept sputtering indignantly to stop him from changing the tone of their conversation, but it would have been nothing more than empty bluster.

All that was left was the silence Gengo invited.

This man’s used to tactics like this.

“There’s just one thing I’d like to ask you. Will you answer?”

“What?” Shikamaru regretted his straightforward response. But it was already too late.

“Why must shinobi be so persecuted?”

Shinobi are persecuted?

He didn’t really understand what that was supposed to mean.

Looking at the silent Shikamaru, Gengo began to speak, as if to give background for his question. “The adjective ‘hidden’ is always attached to the villages where the shinobi live. Why must shinobi hide? And what percentage of

the realms of this continent are ninja land? It is insignificant, is it not? Others rule over this world. The daimyo.”

Gengo was exactly right. The ninja villages did have the word “hidden” in their names, and the majority of the land of the continent was governed and held by the daimyo. But what did that matter? Even if the daimyo did govern the realms, even if the adjective “hidden” was in there, the ninja weren’t persecuted or anything like it.

Shikamaru was the central pillar of the Allied Shinobi, which was precisely why he presumed to understand a little better than most ninja the true state of the world. The daimyo, and the citizens living in the lands they ruled over, were building good relationships of coexistence and coprosperity with the ninja.

“Answer me, Shikamaru. Why are the ninja persecuted by these people?”

“Exactly when have we ever been persecuted by the daimyo?”

“It’s not only the daimyo. It’s *everyone other than ninja* living on this continent.”

It looked to Shikamaru like flames blazed up in Gengo’s eyes.

“Well then, I’d like to ask you one more thing.”

“You said just one quest—”

“I want to ask you one more.” Cutting Shikamaru off firmly, Gengo continued. “Ninja have powers different from all other human beings. Would you agree with me on that?”

Chakra and ninjutsu...

Ninja did indeed have powers very different from normal people. Shikamaru nodded wordlessly.

Gengo looked at him, satisfied somehow, before speaking again. “The powers of the ninja are already so strong they cannot be contained within a human framework.”

Once more, Shikamaru nodded.

The fighting of the Great War two years earlier was so tremendous that the

fate of the entire planet had rested on the outcome. If the Allied Shinobi had been defeated, Gengo and Shikamaru wouldn't have been sitting here chatting like this. Uchiha Madara had tried to pull the people of the world into a dream with unimaginably enormous magic, and Uzumaki Naruto had fought to end the war with the nine beasts in his body, the source of his chakra. Neither could have been called human. The very fact of possessing powers that could give rise to people like this perhaps pushed the ninja beyond the category of human.

“Why must those who surpass the human framework conceal themselves and live in villages with the adjective ‘hidden’ in their names? Why must they do the work of maids and earn money by the day? Who was it that saved the world in the Great War two years ago? It wasn't the daimyo, and it wasn't the citizenry.” Gengo pulled his elbow off the armrest and sat up tall, thrusting his right arm up high. “Was it not the ninja?”

Full of ambition, Gengo's voice overwhelmed Shikamaru.

What is this power...?

His heartbeat grew distant. An exultation he had never before felt flooded him.

Why?

It might have been that Gengo had put into words those thoughts that lay sleeping somewhere in his heart.

Exactly.

Two years earlier, the ninja had saved the world.

“Ninja sacrificed their lives fighting to protect this world, and yet precisely how many people know this? The people do not know the name of even Uzumaki Naruto, revered so in the ninja world as the hero who ended the Great War. And Uchiha Madara, Uchiha Obito, Uchiha Sasuke, Hatake Kakashi, the five Kage, Akatsuki—are they not all names to be passed down through the ages in the world of ninja?”

Gengo was exactly right. No matter how the ninja put their lives on the line to protect this world, word of their feats would never reach the people populating it.

“And yet the daimyo rest on the laurels of a peace built on the corpses of ninja, and rule carefree over the citizens of the continent. The shinobi were even thoughtful enough during the Great War to put up a powerful barrier over the battle zones for these fellows. And what did the citizens and the daimyo do for the ninja who had gone to such lengths for them?”

Nothing had changed. And it was no wonder.

Uchiha Madara, who had gone up against the Allied Shinobi in the Great War, and Otsutsuki Kaguya had tried to trap the people of the continent in a spell and turn them into a battery to generate chakra. As a result, in the middle of fierce fighting, the citizens and the daimyo had all fallen asleep. But still, it wasn't as though there weren't people who knew what had happened.

“Why must the ninja, with their superior powers, live secret lives in hidden villages?” Gengo stood up tall. “Are the ninja really here for them to toy with, to persecute?” He took a step forward.

The stairs.

One stair, then another, Gengo advanced. “Shikamaru. What I am about to say now is what I truly wish to ask you.” He was already at the bottom, so close now that if he took another few steps, he would be standing directly in front of Shikamaru.

“Should this world not be ruled by those possessing these ‘ninja’ powers?”

Shikamaru was unable to spit out a hard “No.” He was stuck wavering between “yes” and “no.” He no longer knew what was right.

One who endures and perseveres. A ninja. Whatever the power he or she might have, a ninja was a ninja because they used that power on behalf of the people without ostentation or affect.

However.

The chakra and the possibilities of the ninjutsu a ninja possessed were unfathomable. If Gengo was right, and the ninja governed instead of the daimyo, wouldn't that be a remarkable step forward for this world?

What was the right choice for the people?

Shikamaru had no answer.

“I will unify this continent under the power of the ninja. I will end this era of warlords and infighting, an era that has gone on for astonishingly long. It is possible with the power of ninja!”

Should Shikamaru really kill Gengo? He no longer understood this man.

6

He couldn't deny Gengo. Shikamaru was confused by his own heart, swayed and shaken.

He had come to this place with the intention of killing the man. He had thought Gengo was a disturbance for the ninja, who had finally begun to walk a path of peace, which was precisely why he had set out on this journey without telling his friends the truth. And yet as he listened to Gengo's words, he came to question whether his own thinking was correct.

"Have you ever thought about why the world of war does not end?" Gengo asked, standing before him.

Shikamaru had honestly never considered the question. There had been many other countries since he was born, and they had risen and fallen through one skirmish after another. And in the gaps, in the holes in the relationships among these countries, the ninja had earned their bread selling their own jutsu. Right from the start, this had been his norm, so the idea of calling it "war" had never entered his mind.

Shikamaru was worried about the world of the ninja, not the larger world that Gengo was talking about.

Would the ninja always be able to look toward a harmonious future? What form should the alliance take to ensure they did? And as he juggled these questions, another also came to mind: how was Shikamaru supposed to make Naruto the Hokage and build up his own generation?

Gengo's words were as wide and deep as these worries of his were small. This man was looking beyond the ninja; he was looking at the world itself.

"Don't you think this is due to nothing other than the fact that the world is ruled by these daimyo, who have no more power than any ordinary citizen, rather than by the ninja with their superior abilities? War will never end because those without chakra or superior skills are constantly quarrelling with one another. None excel in any real way, so no country ever stands above any other. And because each nation ossifies under stagnant control, the world of

war goes on. I intend to stop it. The unification of this continent—a feat none have yet to achieve—that is what I and the revolutionaries will bring about with our ninja powers, Shikamaru.”

“Unify the continent...”

Gengo nodded with satisfaction. “This world is about survival of the fittest, after all. This is the way of beasts, and the beast known as man is no exception; he cannot escape these fetters. So then shouldn’t the ninja—shouldn’t the truly strong—reign at the pinnacle of the power hierarchy? The way the world is now is abnormal. But we will return it to the way it should be. That is the revolution we are trying to start.”

Ninja as the people who should rule this world... Maybe that was true.

“Lord Shikamaru,” came a voice from behind him.

Ro.

Shikamaru turned his head slightly to look back over his shoulder.

“Is the situation not precisely as Lord Gengo has stated? For what reason must the shinobi be used by the daimyo? I myself am a man of the Anbu. Thus, I have witnessed countless times their fell ways. They see the shinobi as merely useful tools. A man who was once my friend was employed in a battle between the Land of Fire and the Land of Wind, and no sooner had the two countries agreed to a cease-fire than he was disposed of as an inconvenience.” Tears spilled from Ro’s swollen eyes.

“I, like, think so too,” Soku muttered, distinctly. Reddish-black bruises blurred the outline of the girl’s still-childish mouth; Gengo had ordered his subordinates to torture them severely and mercilessly. “I agree with this Gengo’s, like, thinking.”

“Hinoko...”

“It’s not just the daimyo. I mean, the people living in the countries they rule, they’re, like, the same.” Soku spoke heatedly, not even noticing that Shikamaru had called her by her real name. “Once people realize we’re ninja, even if they act all cheerful on the outside, you can see this weird suspicion in their eyes, way deep. Those eyes, they’re, like, afraid of us. They doubt us, discriminate

against us. I, like, don't understand why we have to be spilling our blood and sweat for guys like that!" Almost as if she had forgotten that Gengo was the very man who had been torturing her, Soku stared up at the leader of this land longingly.

"Your allies are in agreement. What I am trying to do will have real significance for the shinobi. Shikamaru, come with me. Shall we not rule together?" Gengo offered his hand.

If Shikamaru took that hand, he could never go back. Or maybe even contemplating going back would make him crazy?

If Gengo managed to unify all the lands of the continent, the ninja world would disappear. And if that happened, he'd be able to see Naruto, Choji, Ino, and the others again. Or maybe he could call to them, they could become one, they could re-create the ninja world.

"Come now, Shikamaru. Take my hand." Gengo's words pushed at him.

"Ngh..." Part of him wanted to take the hand before him.

But.

There was another part of him desperately rebelling against the impulse to take Gengo's hand.

"Come." Gengo thrust his hand forward as Shikamaru agonized.

"W-why..." It was like something hard was stuck in his throat. Shikamaru spat out the stinging lump and continued. "Why the hell should I take orders from you..."

"Oh ho! Still failing to comprehend after I've spoken at such length. You are quite the obstinate man."

Shikamaru didn't get it. There was still something in the deepest part of his heart that wasn't completely convinced. And that contrary nature despised the thought of becoming a vassal. He didn't actually understand why; he just didn't like it somehow. It was a resistance on this level. Every other part of his heart sang its agreement with Gengo.

"I see. In that case, how about we do this..." With his eyes, Gengo signaled the

men holding Shikamaru's arms. He then took a few steps back to the bottom of the stairs.

The revolutionaries at Shikamaru's sides removed the handcuffs locking his hands behind his back. At the sudden freedom from long restraint, Shikamaru pitched forward. His forehead about to slam into the floor, he somehow managed to support himself on numb arms and slowly raised his face to look up at Gengo.

Gengo opened his arms and thrust his chest out, looking down at Shikamaru. "If you cannot trust me, then you should kill me right here and now."

"K-kill you?" Shikamaru's voice shook.

"With your jutsu to control shadows, there's no reason you shouldn't be able to strangle me right here. Come, it's fine, go ahead."

How could Gengo stand there so confidently and demand that Shikamaru kill him? The shaken shinobi grew increasingly uncomfortable with this would-be world leader. He had to be misreading something somewhere.

He placed a trembling hand on the floor.

Sunlight poured in through the large windows in the walls of the hall. The dazzling light created a shadow on the floor, from under his arm up to his torso. The inky blackness began to quiver, growing more violent by the moment, becoming a shivering, and finally transforming into a violent shaking.

"Go," Shikamaru ordered the shadow in a voice lacking power. The shadow of his arm became a lance headed for Gengo.

"Now, don't let go, Shikamaru!" Gengo said, with delight, a brilliant light shining in his eyes. His voice, full of ambition, pushed against Shikamaru.

Shikamaru's shadow...

Stopped.

His shadow stopped, painfully close to touching the tips of Gengo's toes. Shikamaru willed it to keep going, but no matter how hard he pushed, it would go no farther than that.

"What's the matter? Why don't you do it?" Gengo asked.

Weird, weird, weird...

Think, think, think, think...

Think, Shikamaru! he yelled at himself. He had taken a wrong step somewhere. Where?

“Hnh!” He felt a small spark popping in his head.

Ro and Soku...

They were the weirdness he felt.

Ro and Soku were Anbu masters, and the Anbu were not so easily dealt with. Why had Ro and Soku so readily accepted Gengo’s words? It should have been impossible for them to be so docile and accepting of their enemy. They appeared to harbor no resentment, despite the fact that this man had so recently tortured them so harshly.

Something was up. And the word for what that was bubbled to the surface of Shikamaru’s mind.

Genjutsu.

Manipulating a person’s thoughts and trapping them within your own jutsu. Genjutsu. Soku and Ro very strongly resembled people under the thrall of genjutsu.

So then was he about to be sucked into the same genjutsu?

Probably.

But genjutsu was a visual jutsu. The representative of visual jutsu was the Uchiha clan of Konohagakure, whose unique *sharingan* eyes were used to cast their genjutsu on their opponents.

Shikamaru looked back on the incident in the plaza. He had assumed that Ro’s jutsu had been weakened somehow, and Gengo had discovered their presence. It couldn’t have been a visual jutsu; they hadn’t looked into Gengo’s eyes until he called them mice. To cast a visual jutsu, you had to meet the eyes of your opponent. All possibility of a visual jutsu died at that moment.

So then what had brought the genjutsu onto Shikamaru and his companions?

His questions came too late. Once a genjutsu had been cast, you needed someone outside the jutsu to pull you out. But his companions Ro and Soku were already inside. And once you set foot into that bottomless bog, all that was left was to wait for it to reach the top of your head. Soon enough, he'd submit to Gengo.

"I don't like it." His thoughts spilled from his mouth.

Gengo looked down on Shikamaru triumphantly.

Shikamaru's shadow was frozen, trembling at the other man's feet.

"Isn't it about time for you to give this up already?" Gengo's gentle voice warmed Shikamaru. His frozen body melted. His mouth naturally relaxed at how good it felt.

The true nature of Gengo's genjutsu...

Before the hazy answer floating up in the back of his mind could take a clear shape, Shikamaru erased it of his own will.

It didn't matter anymore.

7

“Now, Shikamaru.” Gengo pushed his hand forward, almost up against Shikamaru’s nose.

Things would be easier if he accepted it. He could forget about all these hassles.

Shinobi ruled this world. That was how the world should be.

Everything would be easy if he took that hand. He wouldn’t have to struggle anymore.

“Let’s go together.” Gengo’s voice pushed at his back.

Shikamaru’s right hand slowly pulled itself up from his side, nearly sucked into the extended palm.

At the moment the tips of their fingers were about to touch, there was some kind of commotion from behind him.

Shikamaru’s body shot up and danced through the air. As he flew along with incredible force, thrown almost to the ceiling, Shikamaru saw Gengo standing with his legs braced. The revolutionaries surrounding the throne at the top of the stairs were also holding fast in the face of the sudden gust. The only one in the air was Shikamaru.

He crashed into the ceiling, and an intense pain coursed through his body. In the next instant, the wind stopped, and he started falling.

“Nghah!” Unable to even roll into the fall, his back slammed heavily into the floor, knocking the wind out of him. He had been blown away from Gengo, farther away than the still-imprisoned Soku and Ro.

“Shikamaru!” From the entrance, a giant roar shook the room.

A woman’s voice. A familiar voice.

“What are you doing here?”

Clutching his back, Shikamaru turned his eyes toward the voice.

A woman with a sharp gaze and golden hair tied into two bundles stood

there, holding a giant fan in both hands. And that fan had no doubt created the wind that had knocked Shikamaru flying.

Temari...

“So you’re just gonna skip out?! You’re gonna do whatever he tells you to? That’s not like you at all! I expect a lot more from you! Get it together, you idiot! I mean, I know you actually think this guy’s boring! His stupid lecture’s total garbage! Am I right? Say something! Shikamaru!”

His ears, now accustomed to Gengo’s weighty tone, took in the screeching, loud voice, and his eyes flickered with pain. “Ah!”

The haze blanketing his head vanished cleanly and completely. The thing squeezing his heart was gone; it was as if a hole had popped open in his chest. But it felt amazingly good. He inhaled deeply, down to the bottom of his stomach, and slowly let it out. A laugh naturally followed.

A single blow to pull him out of the genjutsu...

“So you show up out of nowhere to badmouth me?” He put a hand on the back of his head, eyes fixed on Temari as he stood up.

“I came to save you. Quit grumbling and thank me.” She rammed the end of the folding fan into the ground, rested her right elbow on the pivot, and puffed her chest out. Behind her stood a line of ninja. They all had the mark of Sunagakure carved into their forehead protectors. “I can’t exactly go letting you die now, can I?” She grinned.

Her smile, glittering like the fire of the desert sun, cleared Shikamaru’s heart. Her earlier words came back to life in his head.

This guy’s a drag! His stupid lecture’s total garbage!

“A drag...huh?” He turned around and looked at Gengo.

The leader of the Land of Silence was turned around, speaking to his aides at the top of the stairs, whose faces were stiff at the sudden upheaval. When he was done, the aides streamed past Shikamaru and turned toward the sand shinobi. They might have been stunned at the sudden attack, but the speed with which they still managed to switch from standing beside the throne to

racing toward the enemy showed their worth as vassals for the independent master of this land.

Behind him, Shikamaru heard the clang of blades crashing against each other. It was strange how calm he felt. He took a light step forward.

Gengo stood before him, shoulders squared, ready to fight.

Shikamaru kept moving forward, silently. When he reached Soku and Ro, he put a hand on each of their shoulders. "It's okay now," he said, and started walking again.

They both leapt up and stopped barely centimeters away from him.

Shikamaru stared at Gengo with serious eyes. "Haaaah..." A yawn slipped out of his mouth. Tears popped up in his eyes, blurring his vision slightly.

"Oi." Gengo pointed at Shikamaru. At his face...

"Hmm?" Shikamaru brought his own hand to his nose.

It was wet. At some point, blood had started coming from his left nostril.

"That Temari..." The only cause for the nosebleed he could think of was that she had slammed him up against the ceiling with that sudden gust.

"We seem to have been interrupted. Now, where were we again?" Gengo asked, his voice smooth.

Shikamaru put his right hand on his head and shook it broadly from side to side. The bones in his neck crackled.

"Simply because reinforcements have arrived—"

"What?! Reinforcements? Where?" Shikamaru raised his voice in surprise, interrupting and stunning Gengo. He watched Gengo's eyes opening wider and realized how crazy his own words sounded. "Oh, you mean them? You got it all wrong. They're not reinforcements."

"Then what would you call them?"

"Dunno. They came on their own."

Gengo was dumbfounded and unable to hide his surprise at how different Shikamaru was now from mere moments earlier. "Fine," he said, finally. "A

surprise attack on this level cannot shake our land or our will.”

“Pfft!” Shikamaru snorted, unconsciously.

A blue vein popped up on Gengo’s forehead.

“It won’t shake your land? Even though they made it all the way into your castle?” Shikamaru said.

“Don’t underestimate my aides. There are very few ninja of their caliber.”

“Well, I’m looking forward to it.”

“Listen, Shikamaru,” Gengo said.

“No thanks,” Shikamaru said, decisively, shoving his right hand forward. “Listening to what you have to say is what gets me stuck in your genjutsu.”

“Hngh!” Gengo’s right eyebrow trembled slightly.

“Thanks to her, I managed to get out of it finally. And I’m not falling for your tricks twice.”

“Soft... You’re soft, Shikamaru.”

“You put your chakra into your voice and cast your genjutsu on your opponent with your tone and your words. And y’know, that jutsu suits you, with all your pretensions of being a revolutionary. You really thought this through, huh? The reason my shadow lost power during your lecture was because you already had me in your jutsu by then.”

“Genjutsu? Ridiculous. My words are volition, intention. I truly believe everything I told you before. And those words were not just my personal beliefs; they are fact. Ninja are the ones who should rule this world. This is a definitive fact. You are the one who does not understand.”

Gengo’s words made his earlobes shudder. Shikamaru could feel chakra flowing in, but he wasn’t particularly interested in trying to avoid it.

He was totally fine.

His heart, which had been roiling like a stormy sea, was now so calm it was strange. He wasn’t afraid, no matter what happened. Or rather...

“It’s all, I dunno, it’s all such a drag.” Another yawn forced its way out of his

mouth. “Why do you get tears in your eyes when you yawn, anyway?”

Gengo didn’t answer. He seemed to be thoroughly rattled.

Shikamaru wasn’t doing it on purpose. This wasn’t a strategy. He had simply returned to his most basic self. Temari’s rebuke had made him remember.

He was not a king; he had never been one for grandiose thinking, for contemplating the entire world or anything. He was a person who tended to find things annoying, who wanted a just-right life. The world depending on what he did was basically the ultimate hassle.

I can’t take on a burden like that. You wanna change the world, you get in there and do what you gotta.

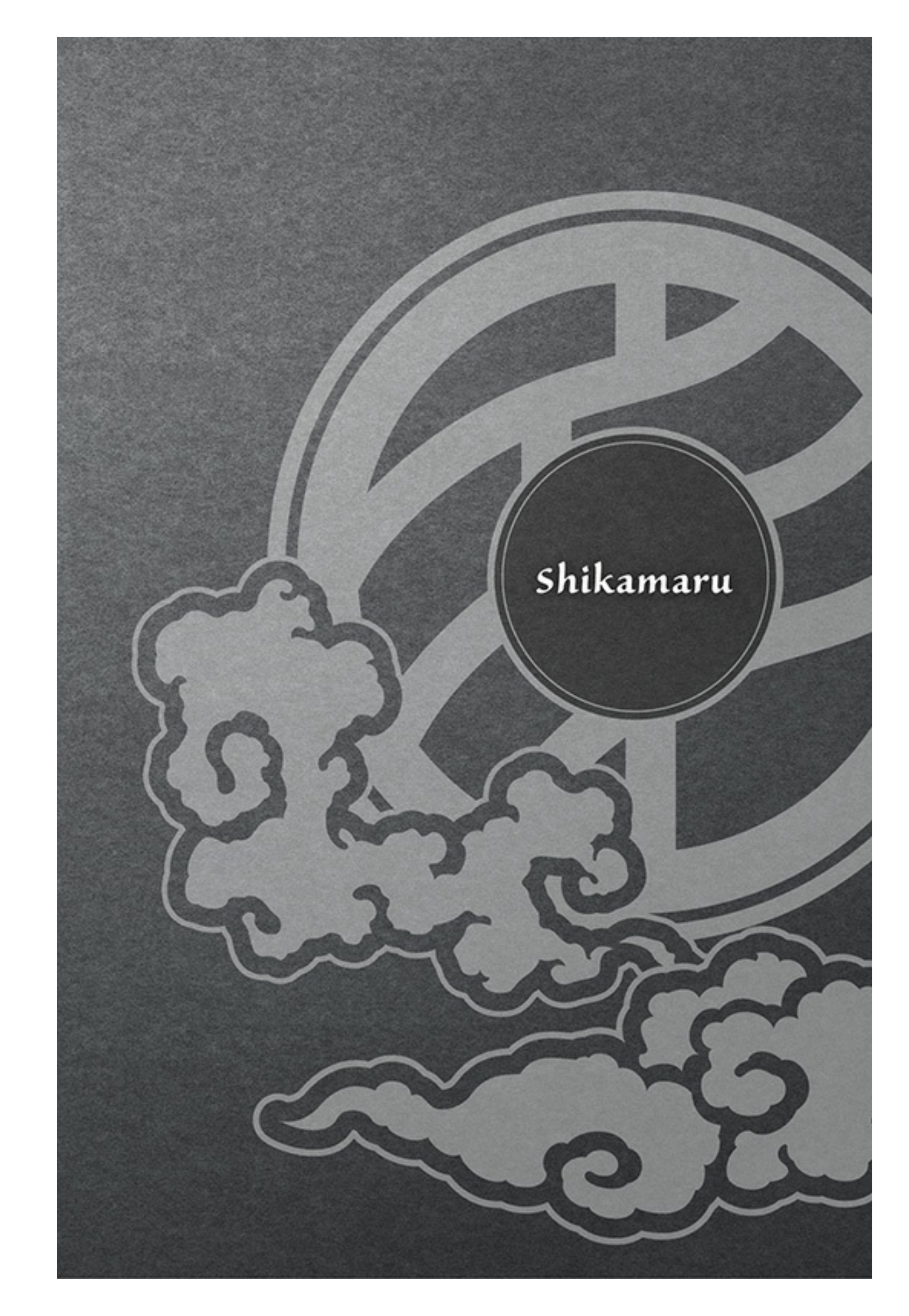
But wait. If Gengo changed the world, then what would happen to Naruto and everybody? What would happen to Temari, after she went to the trouble of coming to rescue him?

“Y’know, leaving you to do your thing is actually not gonna work.”

“W-where did all that ambition from only moments ago disappear to? What are you thinking, Shikamaru?! Open your eyes, Shikamaru!”

“What’re you even talking about? My eyes are finally open now.” A languid smile spreading across his lips, Shikamaru took another step closer to Gengo. “The real me, y’know?”

He was already close enough for the two of them to cross blades.



Shikamaru

Shikamaru

1

Intense fighting spread out all around him. In the midst of the clanging of blade smashing against blade, of the back and forth of angry roars, Shikamaru stared at Gengo.

“Are you saying that a world where shinobi are being persecuted is acceptable?” Gengo shouted, pushed to the edge. In his look of desperation—brow furrowed, blue vein popping up on his forehead—there wasn’t a shred of the divine solemnity Shikamaru had felt until moments earlier. Maybe it was because Shikamaru had been awakened from the genjutsu, but it really did look like all hint of ambition had vanished from Gengo.

“What are you panicking about?”

“What?”

“You’re so desperate, it’s pathetic.”

“Who...” Gengo faltered before a groan slipped out from between his clenched teeth. “Those who have gained superhuman powers, as the ninja have, are destined to be feared by normal people. This fear becomes discrimination, and discrimination begets control. If we don’t take a stand now, the ninja will be forced into ever more distress.”

“The thing is, I...” His spine cracked as he cocked his head to the right, his eyes never straying from Gengo. “I think it’d be better if there were no more ninja.”

“W-what are you saying?”

“Huh? You’re not a ninja anymore, are you?”

“Ngh...” Again, Gengo faltered. His ridiculous countenance brought a smile to Shikamaru’s own face.

“I mean, you went to all the trouble of bringing all these ninja together. You use this union, and you could have war under control pretty quick.”

“I-in the short term...”

“You’ll never know unless you try.”

Gengo’s hand reached up toward his own back, like he was grabbing something.

A kunai.

Shikamaru’s relaxed eyes grew tense. When they locked him up in that jail cell, he had been relieved of anything that might have been called a weapon.

“Shikamaru!” Temari’s voice.

Shikamaru glanced over to find something flying straight at him. The instant it came within reach, he reached up into empty space with his right hand.

A kunai.

Temari laughed.

A pause.

As he turned, he saw Gengo leap forward.

Space...

Shikamaru flew.

Sparks flashed as their kunai crashed into each other.

“It’s because there’s fighting that ninja like us exist.”

“Babbling fool,” Gengo said, voice full of violence.

Both fighters slashed with their kunai to try and shred the other. And then they were back on the ground again, maintaining the same distance they had before. Neither paused to glare at the other, however.

They kicked at the ground at the same time and raced toward each other.

Shikamaru thrust his kunai at Gengo’s face—a face contorted with bloodlust.

Their aim was the same. Gengo pushed his own kunai toward Shikamaru’s face.

Shikamaru tilted his head the tiniest bit to evade it. But the blade ripped a straight line across his cheek, a splash of blood dancing upward. In front of him, Gengo bore a similar cut on the opposite cheek.

Shikamaru grabbed Gengo's outstretched wrist with his left hand. Similarly, Gengo caught Shikamaru's right wrist in his left hand. They glared at each other, arms outstretched toward each other's face.

"A single step to end all our fighting... That's the alliance. First, the ninja come together, and then we push that circle out to bring in the daimyo and the citizens. Later on, when the world is one, us ninja are totally going to disappear. It might not happen in my lifetime, but it's definitely going to happen in the lifetime of my children or grandchildren."

"This world is too harsh for such idealism to actually work."

"Isn't that ambition of yours pretty idealistic?"

The corners of Gengo's mouth were pulled up to the point where it was bizarre. It was much too wicked to be called a smile.

"It's pointless to try and cast genjutsu on me."

"Well, listen, Shikamaru. The greater the possibility of realizing it, the more value any ideal possesses. The ideal you state is like trying to grab on to the clouds. Your ideal and mine, the difference between them is like that between the heavens and the earth."

"You're pretty foolish, huh?"

"He who does not realize his own foolishness is the true fool."

"So then that means you're foolish, right?"

Gengo's lips twitched.

Here he comes!

Shikamaru's wrist creaked in pain as he thrust his kunai forward; Gengo had locked his joints with his left arm. Turning the wrist Shikamaru still clutched, Gengo pointed the tip of his kunai at the hollow of Shikamaru's neck. Wrist still held fast by Shikamaru, he made deft use of his fingertips and pushed the blade toward Shikamaru's neck.

Shikamaru had no time to dodge it. He twisted his body in the same direction his wrist was twisted and flew. Using Gengo's right arm as an axle, he leapt, rotating counterclockwise. Evading the kunai and flying through space,

Shikamaru's feet came crashing in toward the top of Gengo's head.

Releasing Shikamaru's wrist, Gengo brought his left hand up to cover his head. Shikamaru's power kick landed on Gengo's arm, and a thick cracking sound filled the air around them.

That was not the end of it.

Shikamaru twisted the leg he had kicked out in defense and kicked with his other leg at Gengo's side.

Gengo took a step backward.

Shikamaru hit the ground and kept moving. He quickly squatted down and shot out his right leg. He spun and swept Gengo's legs out from under him, a copy of the Barrage of Lions that Uchiha Sasuke had shown him during their chunin exams, with a little spice from Naruto for the Uzumaki Naruto Barrage.

It went well.

His shins severely beaten, Gengo fell onto his backside. Shikamaru pounced. He crouched and brought his kunai to the other man's throat. If Gengo tried to move even a millimeter, Shikamaru would kill him without hesitation.

"W-why don't my words reach you?"

"Genjutsu only works on guys who've got a crack in their heart."

"But everything you've said and done since that woman appeared, you're nothing but cracks!"

"You really are a fool, huh?" Sighing, Shikamaru smiled at Gengo. "My heart is basically a bunch of cracks and gaps. No... Maybe not gaps, exactly. It's like, my heart's so full of gaps there are no gaps at all. Although someone as puffed up and full of himself as you wouldn't get that."

"Th-that—"

"Is staring you in the face right now, so get used to it. Your words don't reach me anymore."

Beads of sweat oozed from Gengo's forehead.

"The truth is, I'd rather not be doing this. I'd rather be just living my life how I

do. But...”

Those thoughts always smoldering somewhere in your heart, Shikamaru told himself, you cut them off here and now.

He was ready.

“It looks like I can’t live like that.”

People always ended up counting on him, so he had no choice but to do something. Every *no choice* had piled up and piled up and made him into who he was now. So it was hopeless. He was stuck. He had never really thought things through past this vague point, so he had endlessly remained unresolved, always half-baked.

He had been wrong, fundamentally and utterly wrong.

The only one who could take care of his dreams was him. And Shikamaru’s dream of a somehow just-right life had not come true. But wasn’t that okay?

Because Shikamaru had found a new dream.

“From now on, my life’s about building a world that’ll let all those guys who just wanna live lazy, hazy lives do exactly that. I’m going to end this fighting and bring this world together. And then I’m gonna make it a place where everyone dreaming of living a regular life without any special dreams can live how they want.”

He would protect the happiness of all those people and their ability to live just-right lives.

He was satisfied with this new dream of his; it was very *him*. All he had to do to realize it was to make Naruto the Hokage, become a master, train Mirai, and end up as a ninja who wouldn’t bring shame to his father or Asuma. It was the opposite of the order he had been working in. Up to that point, he had felt pressure from outside, based upon which he had set his own framework and tried to live within it without shame—which was exactly what gave rise to all the contradictions.

His own dreams couldn’t come from the outside world. The outside world was what lay beyond his own dreams.

“I’ve finally busted out.”

“So what does that matter?”

Shikamaru suddenly heard gentle murmuring from behind him, mingled with bloodlust. He leapt away from Gengo.

The claws of a tiger ripped through the air in the place where his head had just been. An ink-black tiger...

“I won’t let you kill Lord Gengo for such a lazy dream.”

“Sai!” Shikamaru pulled himself to his feet and faced Sai, who stood before him with brush and scroll at the ready.

“Lord Gengo! Hurry and set your will before these foolish Sunagakure ninja!”

“Mmm.” Gengo nodded and ran up the stairs, climbing to the throne in a single burst. “Hear me!” He spread out his arms. “All of you!”

A lecture.

“As if I’m gonna let you!”

“I won’t allow you to get in the way!”

Shikamaru went to climb the stairs, and Sai moved to block him.

“Go!” Sai’s brush moved, and a tiger surged from the scroll. This new tiger and the one that had tried to tear his head off came at Shikamaru at the same time.

From the top of the stairs, Gengo began to speak in a loud voice. Unless Shikamaru stopped him, the sand ninja would have their movements sealed by his genjutsu.

Something flashed in him suddenly.

“Listen, Temari!” Shikamaru shouted, not knowing where she was. “He casts genjutsu with words! Wipe out his words with your wind!”

“Got it!”

He heard her powerful voice from surprisingly nearby. In the next instant, fierce gales began to gust the length and breadth of the hall, overlapping and

building on each other. Temari's awe-inspiring winds drowned out anything Gengo tried to say.

Slipping past tiger claws, Shikamaru gazed up at the top of the stairs. Gengo was trying to set off for greener pastures, having grasped that his voice wasn't reaching anyone.

"Dammit!" Shikamaru moved toward the staircase, but Sai's sketched tigers stopped him.

"I absolutely will not let you pass!"

"Open your eyes already, Sai!"

"It is all of *you* who must open your eyes." Sai was completely trapped in Gengo's jutsu.

A gust several times stronger than any preceding it blew up from behind Shikamaru. The ink tiger became a spray and disappeared like mist.

"Leave him to me! Go after that guy!" Temari flew out in front of Shikamaru and faced Sai squarely.

"Temari..."

"Thank me later. Hurry!"

"Got it," he said, and raced toward the stairs.

"Shikamaru! Stop!"

"Whoopsie! Your opponent's right here." Temari opened her fan to cut Sai off.

Shikamaru turned his gaze on the two of them once more before sprinting up the stairs, eyes unwaveringly forward.

2

Temari was relieved; they made it just in time.

After discussing Shikamaru with Gaara, she had gone to Konoha and questioned Naruto. He knew nothing. But like Temari, he felt like something was up with Shikamaru. He talked to Ino and Choji, which only solidified that impression, so he went to press Kakashi for answers. Pushed by a fearsome Naruto, who had dragged Temari—an outsider—along for the chat, Kakashi listened carefully to Temari's proposal that the sand shinobi mount a rescue before finally making a decision: he agreed to the dispatch of the Sunagakure ninja on the condition that they do nothing to make the situation worse.

Before coming to Konoha, she had made arrangements so that the shinobi of the village could be mobilized quickly. Once she got Kakashi's approval, she sent up a signal to the village and started running toward the Land of Silence. Along the way, she joined up with the sand ninja, led by Gaara.

Soon after they arrived in the Land of Silence, they kidnapped whoever was handy and questioned them. More than ten days had passed since Shikamaru left, and Temari was starting to panic. The questioning turned into interrogation. A man calling himself a revolutionary soon spit up the information that ninja from Konohagakure were being held in the castle.

Once they knew that, the rest was easy.

They rode an airship of sand created by Gaara and infiltrated the castle, just as Shikamaru was in the middle of his little chat with Gengo, the ruler of this land. Together with her comrades, Temari drove off the people guarding the passage that led to the great hall and peeked inside. She could hardly stand it as she watched Shikamaru seemingly moved by Gengo's talk about the world being ruled by shinobi.

Shikamaru's not the sort of guy to be led around by a man like that! An almost violent rage took her over; she blew the doors open and flew into the hall.

The relief she had felt when she heard it was a genjutsu...

Eyes open now, Shikamaru was back, the man Temari had always known. Just

seeing him take on Gengo with apathetic eyes and blood running from his nose, she felt like it had been worth it to come all that way.

“I don’t have time for your woolgathering,” the Konoha man snarled at her, clumsy smile on his lips. The brush he clutched had already produced more than a few tigers and wolves. And again, it set free a white tiger baring malicious fangs. She’d seen the animals he drew before all this, but the ones he drew today all had an unprecedented evil look to them.

Pretty sure his name’s Sai...

A ninja on the same team as Naruto and Sakura.

“I’m not the sort that gets taken down by some one-hit wonder,” she muttered, as she used her entire body to wave her fan. The wind changed and transformed into a weasel with teeth like sickles. The weasel whirled around and around, slashing at the throat of the tiger before it. Instantly, the tiger became ink and fell to the ground.

“It’s almost charming how you don’t hold back.” Sai’s voice.

Tight smile on her face, Temari looked in the direction of that voice.

He’s not there!

Where had he gone and when? She didn’t have time to chase him down with her eyes.

“A momentary body from a black mist... There is no ninja who can hold it completely.” From behind.

She wouldn’t make it.

“Woh-kay! Here we go!” She knew she was going to be cut from behind.

From the right? From the left?

She gambled.

Praying the slash wouldn’t come from the right, she leaned hard to that side.

The tiger’s claws ran past her left shoulder, very nearly scraping it.

“You’re soft,” Sai said, in a voice so cold it gave her chills.

At some point, he had come to stand in front of her.

“Goddammit!” She threw up her fan as a shield, still leaning to the right. It was made from a fabric so tough an iron blade couldn’t pass through it—plenty of protection against the thrust of a kunai.

But...

“Ngh!” A sharp pain pierced her abdomen.

“Sensitive chakra manipulation... It’s my specialty,” Sai said, innocently. The kunai in his hand had torn through the fan and was sticking out of Temari’s stomach, a hazy mist of sorts covering the blade.

Chakra. By covering the blade in chakra concentrated enough to be visible, he could impart a strength and sharpness dozens of times greater than normal. “No matter how hard you all fight, you’re no match for Lord Gengo. At some point, we revolutionaries will rule over this world.”

“D-do you really believe that?”

“Mmm,” Sai said, smile firm on his face. This wasn’t simply a matter of being under a genjutsu. Sai’s entire face was colored with an unshakable faith in Gengo.

But...

“Then why are you crying?”

“What?”

Temari hadn’t missed the tear sliding out of the corner of his right eye and down his cheek. Somewhere deep in his heart, Sai was conflicted.

“I’m not crying.” Sai shoved the kunai deeper.

Her breath stopped.

“Would you wake up alreadyyyyyyyyy!” An angry howl.

Sai disappeared abruptly from Temari’s view, leaving only his kunai plunged in her belly.

“You okay?” Someone was supporting her as her body pitched forward.

“S-Sakura?”

“Don’t talk. I’ll plug up this hole in your stomach.” Sakura pulled the kunai out and quickly touched the opening of the other woman’s wound.

A wave of warm chakra gently wrapped Temari’s abdomen. “W-what about Sai?”

“It’s okay. I came with friends.”

“Huh?” Temari turned her eyes in the direction Sai had disappeared.

Sakura’s punch had sent him flying and now someone was holding down her former enemy. A giant...

She was pretty sure he was Shikamaru’s friend.

“Choji! Keep him down!” a female shinobi with long hair shouted from behind the giant man holding Sai down, both hands spread out.

“It’s just, it’d be very annoying if anyone were to say that the ninja of Konoha didn’t move when Shikamaru was in danger,” Sakura said, placing her hands on Temari’s stomach again. Two battered ninja stood behind her, an angular middle-aged man and a girl much younger than Temari.

Withstanding the pain in her stomach, Temari turned toward Sakura. “H-he uses genjutsu...”

“I heard from these two.”

The ninja standing behind her nodded.

“Right! Prep okay!” the female ninja said to Choji, and then extended a hand toward Sai. He kicked and struggled beneath the giant, face full of bloodlust. Temari could see fangs glittering slickly through the lips of his clenched jaw.

“Ninpo! Mind Transmission jutsu!” the female ninja shouted.

“Once Ino activates that jutsu, it’ll all be fine,” Sakura murmured.

Choji pulled himself away from Sai.

Sai stood up.

Instantly, Ino shuddered sharply as if hit by lightning and stopped moving. Her body froze, palms still turned toward Sai.

“There, all better.” Sakura took her hands away.

The pain in Temari’s stomach had vanished.

∞

She dove deeper and deeper.

She still couldn’t find Sai. Diving and diving and still nothing but darkness.

This was Sai. Even at the best of times, he wasn’t fully aware of his true self. She knew she wouldn’t find him with just a little gentle prodding. Even still, she had to help him.

If I don’t, there was no point in me coming here.

Ino struggled urgently in the back of Sai’s consciousness. Her Mind Transmission jutsu, which allowed her to dive into the mind of her enemy and move them with her own volition, could also have an effect from the inside on her opponent’s mind. She had realized this at their chunin exam, when she dove into Sakura’s mind only to have to fight that mind with her own.

When she saw the letter he had sent, filled with an oblivious pathos, Ino had understood Sai’s conflict so well it hurt. At that time, she still didn’t know anything about this man Gengo or his genjutsu, but she felt like she had to go. Naturally, she had wanted to rescue Shikamaru, but what moved Ino to action was that letter so full of Sai’s struggle.

He had always been troubled by his own emptiness, and now Sai was more deeply immersed in Gengo’s genjutsu than anyone else. She was the only one who could save him.

Which was why she kept diving so deep, and then deeper still.

If she dove too deep, she would lose the sharp focus of her own self; she would fade and be caught in her opponent’s mind, never to return. She had a reason for taking this risk to help Sai.

I want to talk with him more...

She wanted to know more about Sai and the slightly sad smile he always wore. She couldn't just leave him behind in a place like this.

In the true darkness, a depth untouched by even a single ray of light, she felt a faint warmth.

Naruto's chakra.

Sakura's was mixed in there too.

Yamato...

Kakashi...

The chakra of the ninja of Konoha blended together, a flame burning in the middle of a blizzard. As if seeking that faint warmth, Ino turned toward the chakra mixture.

He was there. With all five senses, she felt Sai curled up in the cocoon of warm chakra.

"This way, Sai!" She thrust out a desperate hand.

Sai lifted his face at the sound of her voice. He was crying, eyes puffy and red.

"C'mon, come with me!"

"You're..." Legs still crossed, he didn't reach out to her.

Ino grabbed his shoulders tightly. "Let's go."

Sai smiled. A natural smile, the sort she'd never seen on him before.

∞

As if desperate for oxygen, as if coming up from the bottom of the sea, Ino sought air with her whole body. And then the darkness broke and her view was flooded with light.

Enemies and allies fought without mercy. Protected by Choji and Sakura, Ino sat next to the head of a sleeping Sai.

"How'd it go, Ino?"

She heard Choji's voice, but didn't have the strength to answer.

Sai slowly opened his eyes.

She grabbed his hand. "Sai!"

"You..." Sai murmured absently, hand still in hers.

"You're safe now," Ino said, tears spilling out of her eyes.

"Thanks, beautiful."

"Idiot..."

They smiled quietly at each other.

3

Shikamaru raced ever higher as though lured upward by the long, twisting staircase, eyes focused on Gengo's back ahead of him. His aides were fighting in the hall, while this man, revered like a god, fled by himself. Closed in by stone walls, the spiral staircase felt strangely oppressive. The twisting path was almost dizzying.

"How about you be good and give up already?" Shikamaru called, with no expectation of an answer.

Up ahead, an enormous iron door—an ill-formed and unrefined gate totally without adornment—appeared. Gengo didn't hesitate; he pushed the heavy door back and disappeared inside.

Shikamaru caught a glimpse of darkness through the crack before the door shut behind the other man. He put a hand on the closed door. He was certain it had to be some kind of trap. He knew he was being lured in somehow.

He opened the door anyway.

It didn't matter what scheme Gengo had hatched. He could only go forward.

The space on the other side of the door was pitch black. An aura lay hidden in the silent darkness.

One person.

Abruptly, the door behind him slammed shut. The aura was in front of him, so either there was someone else or that had been a little trick of the owner of the aura before him.

"So you've come alone, fearing nothing, hm? I can only pray your action does not prove foolhardy." Gengo's voice. "You have no hope of finding me in this darkness."

"For generations, the shinobi of the Nara House have manipulated our own shadows. And what gives birth to shadows is darkness. In a sense, darkness is the mother of the shadow. For me, living with shadows, this darkness is like the inside of my mother's womb. I've been able to see you this whole time."

This was half bluff.

He was indeed accustomed to the darkness, but that didn't mean he could actually see in the dark. He was simply a little more sensitive to the strength of auras than other ninja.

"Interesting... You truly are an interesting man. It's almost a shame to kill you here," Gengo said, in a tone brimming with self-satisfaction.

Silence...

Shikamaru and Gengo alike held their tongues, narrowing their awareness to focus on their opponent's aura.

"I was originally a ninja of Kirigakure," Gengo began speaking as if intentionally breaking the silence. "Do you know of a man named Momochi Zabuza?"

He did.

Naruto kept mentioning that name around the time he had just become a genin. Shikamaru was pretty sure Momochi Zabuza was a masterful rogue ninja who got stuck fighting on a mission he shouldn't have accepted.

"When Zabuza attempted a coup d'état in Kirigakure, what he was aiming for was my ideal world."

Gengo's ideal world—that ninja themselves would rule the world.

"However, the plot was exposed through the reports of collaborators, and Zabuza became a rogue ninja. My youthful self numbered among his followers at that time. But Zabuza needed money to realize his ideal, and thus joined forces with wealthy merchants—basically the mafia—and accepted dirty work. Many of our brethren turned their backs on Zabuza and went their separate ways when he dirtied his own hands in the name of his just cause. I was one of them. It's been a dozen or so years since then, and I finally obtained a country. It begins now..."

Gengo's voice was shaking.

"My ambition finally begins now! And yet, because of you lot!"

Bloodlust began to bleed into Gengo's aura. The quiet sound of kicking at the

earth reached Shikamaru's ears.

He drew his kunai and readied himself. He couldn't see anything. All he could do was follow the aura.

Gengo was headed straight for him. He was getting far too little information from directly in front of him.

"Zabuza mistook the path! He hurried to realize his ideal and dirtied his hands! But I'm not like him! After a long road of hardship, I came up with this jutsu, swallowed people into a vortex of passion, and now rule this land. And I'll expand this vortex until it consumes the entire continent!"

Shikamaru heard something unusual in the shouting voice. The sound of the air being sliced.

A blade. And a fairly large one.

A hatchet? No, thinner. Something like a halberd or a longsword.

The aura pressed in on him.

The rush of air was closing in on his own neck. He held his breath and flew to the side. His body was almost at a diagonal when he felt the blade racing above him.

"Nicely dodged. But don't think that this is the end!" came a shout, following by the side-sweeping wind changing trajectories in the empty space between them.

Shikamaru tumbled forward and propped himself up on one knee, as the howling pressed in toward the crown of his head.

In the darkness, he dreamed of Gengo.

From the range of the slicing sound, he figured out the length of the blade and got an idea of the hilt attached to it. Beyond that was Gengo.

In this darkness, he couldn't generate a shadow. He couldn't use ninjutsu to capture his enemy. He only had his own body to rely on.

Shikamaru had no weapons left besides somewhat unreliable physical techniques. His mind was loose, ready; he even had the mental leeway to note

idly that he should've gotten Lee to teach him something if this was where he was going to end up.

"Heh heh." He laughed to himself, satisfaction at the return of his old soft way of thinking.

The howling touched the tip of his tied-back hair.

"Ngh!" Concentrating every nerve in his body, he rolled forward with all his might toward the Gengo he pictured.

Once the longsword had gotten well within reach, he immediately went limp. When driven forward by a blade, it was more effective to get in close than it was to try and run.

You try to live, you die; you go for death, you live...

The foundation of the art of war.

Behind Shikamaru tumbling forward, the longsword cut into the floor. He rolled once more, and then squatted deeply, stretched his legs out, and flew upward. He felt his head hit Gengo's body.

With a groan, Gengo dropped into a crouch. "Enough!"

Shikamaru set his right foot on top of Gengo's bent knee and launched his left knee at his opponent's head. Thanks to his boundless dreaming about the strength of the other man's aura, his movements, the many sounds, Shikamaru had a very clear image of Gengo in his brain.

"Gaah!" Even after taking that very hearty blow, Gengo did not fall. Through brute strength, he kept his body upright, released the longsword, and wrapped both arms around Shikamaru's torso.

At first, Shikamaru felt like he was floating, but then an electric current and a sharp pain pierced his spine at the nape of his neck. By the time he realized he had been punched, Gengo's aura was already standing up. Shikamaru heard the sound of steel scraping along the stone floor. His enemy had probably retrieved the longsword.

His whole body was numb. It took another few moments for his body to do what he wanted it to again.

“In Kirigakure, we have the seven swords, and the jutsu to manipulate these swords is beaten into the village ninja from a young age,” Gengo noted as he swung the longsword.

His target was the prone figure of Shikamaru.

There was only one way.

Absurd.

He’d never even considered trying a stunt like this before. But he had no other techniques for escape.

“Now, then!”

Shikamaru raised his arms to meet the howling. Aiming for the sword in his imagination, he thrust both hands forward.

He felt a chill in his hands.

The sword.

“L-looks like that worked somehow.”

“Ridiculous,” Gengo muttered, dumbfounded.

With good reason. Because somehow, Gengo’s longsword was firmly wedged between the palms of Shikamaru’s hands.

“The ninja art of catching a naked blade... I guess.”

“How long do you intend to continue this foolishness?!” Anger bled into Gengo’s voice.

His opponent poured his strength into the blade suspended in midair. He intended to use physical strength alone to push it down and into Shikamaru. Gengo, standing with perfect posture, pressing the longsword down, and Shikamaru, still lying prone on the ground, trying to push it up. The advantage was with Gengo.

Slowly but steadily, the blade descended.

“I will kill you, you bastard. And I will pull all of those in the hall together into the same mind, and we will proceed toward my ambition.”

“Whoa, whoa, now I’m ‘you bastard’? You don’t even realize your true colors are showing here. No way you’re gonna be able to just do whatever you want with this world.”

“What am I to say of this situation? You are a fool who cannot even grasp the superiority of your opponent.”

“And who was it that was going to make this fool his right-hand man?”

“You and your endless trivialities... There’s no center to your words.”

Gengo put even more power into the sword.

As he pushed back, Shikamaru’s arms trembled. He was already close to his limit. Tepid sweat poured down his forehead. He had been driven into a corner.

Even still, Shikamaru laughed. “You know, some things are strong exactly because they have no center.”

“I have no intention of getting into some vain dialogue with you. It’s time you die.”

“Now listen,” Shikamaru said, as the blade closed in on his forehead. “I like looking at the clouds.”

“Silence.”

“The thing about clouds is, you can’t grab on to them. You can try, but it’s not gonna happen. And if there’s a wind, they get blown away pretty quick. They’re pretty shady, no center at all.”

Something cool touched his forehead.

He ignored it and kept going. “But even something shady with no center can sometimes make it rain, sometimes make it snow.”

“And what of it?”

“I’m telling you you’re wrong to think that having a center is the same as being serious. Even with a center or whatever... Even you’re not unshakable; as long as you have something in you that totally won’t bend, it all works out somehow. Although an idiot who doesn’t get something like this, who thinks he can just make everyone do exactly what he wants, isn’t ever going to

understand, even it kills him.”

The skin on his forehead split and something warm spilled out. And yet Shikamaru didn't stop talking. Gengo was naturally being drawn into the rambling tale he was telling. The other man's awareness was so focused on his words that Shikamaru could practically reach out and grab it.

This was his chance.

Still prone on the ground, he kicked out at Gengo's pivot leg braced in front of him. His enemy stumbled; the blade tilted slightly. Rather than go against that flow, Shikamaru merely turned his head, and the blade was driven into the floor, its point stealing only the top layer of skin on his forehead.

Turning his body in the same direction as his head, he pulled himself out from between Gengo's thighs and sprang to his feet.

After taking a single shallow breath, Shikamaru kicked at the floor and leapt upward. Immediately, he thrust his right leg out toward Gengo's face.

The sudden, soft sensation of catching his opponent's nose came through from the sole of his foot.

Gengo did not fall.

As Shikamaru landed, he bounced backward, escaping the reach of the longsword.

“So? How's my word genjutsu taste?”

“Don't underestimate me, boy...”

“Hey, hey. Now it's 'boy'?”

From behind Shikamaru came the piercing sound of metal scraping against metal. A brilliant light poured in.

“You okay, Shikamaru?!” It was Choji's voice.

Shikamaru looked over his shoulder to find the door thrown open, his companions staring at him. Choji, Ino, and Sakura, together with Soku and Ro, now free of the genjutsu.

And of course, Temari was there too.

Wondering what had happened to Sai, Shikamaru shifted his gaze back to Gengo. “Get your jutsu ready, Ino!” he shouted.

He whirled his right hand around behind his hips, raised his thumb, and gave a signal that only Ino would understand. Theirs was a relationship built on long years of working as a team. They understood each other’s thinking perfectly.

“Roger!” came the answer from Ino.

“No one do anything until I give the signal!”

The blood flowing from his forehead obstructed his view. Wiping it away with his hand, he pulled out the Konohagakure forehead protector he had tucked into his vest and tied it tightly around his forehead. He had his doubts about just how good the band would be at stopping the bleeding, but it was better than nothing.

“And now the cavalry, eh, Shikamaru?” Eyes bloodshot, Gengo brandished the longsword and charged in to close the distance between them.

Shikamaru wove his signs, and a shadow stretched out from his feet and raced toward Gengo.

“I am not such a fool as to be caught by a rotten magic trick!” Before the tip of the shadow could touch his feet, Gengo kicked at the floor and bounded forward. Letting gravity take over, he slashed at Shikamaru.

Shikamaru’s head split in two. His flesh lost its color and faded to black.

Jutsu.

“Doppelgänger!” Gengo muttered, as Shikamaru charged his back, kunai in hand.

He slashed at Gengo’s neck.

Gengo did indeed have the sword arts drilled into him in Kirigakure, and he stooped forward to dodge the blade with exquisite timing. He then flipped his body with the strength of his bent knees alone, and the blade of his longsword followed, horizontal and still lowered.

Shikamaru’s torso was bisected. And again he transformed into shadow.

“Such impudence!” Gengo sneered hatefully.

“I’m ready!” Ino shouted at the same time.

“Good!”

Shikamaru’s preparations were also finished.

His real body was sufficiently far from the reach of Gengo’s blade, waiting for Ino to activate her Mind Transmission jutsu. Ino, in her signature position—the palms of both hands thrust out, a triangle created with her thumbs and index fingers—stared at Gengo.

“Ninja art! Mind Transmission jutsu!”

Gengo immediately turned on his heel and ran from her, and Ino smiled quietly. The palms that had been targeting Gengo turned to Shikamaru.

His entire body went rigid. He knew Ino was coming into his mind.

The jutsu was only activated for a brief instant. In the time it took for their breath to nearly become one, he was already free of it.

“Soku! Ro!” Ino called, releasing the jutsu.

Just as planned...

The mind transmission jutsu let her dive into the mind of her target, allowing both minds to share the consciousness within the body where the jutsu was activated. They had used this so Shikamaru could share with Ino the plan he had put together. And she would share it with Soku and Ro.

It had been the three of them who decided to take this man down, after all.

“Okay! Here we go!” Shikamaru yelled.

Soku and Ro nodded.

He raced toward Gengo as Soku and Ro ran to the edges of the room to take up positions in opposite corners.

“Whatever you try, it’s futile!”

“Look, this is the final battle. We should at least have fun with it.”

Kunai and longsword clashed in midair. But there was an overwhelming

difference in mass between their weapons of choice, and Shikamaru bent nearly in half, pushed back by Gengo's slash attack. The longsword swiveled around and came back.

And again Shikamaru was bifurcated. A shadow, after all.

"How long will this mockery go on?!" Gengo spat, frenzied.

Dropping from the sky above, Shikamaru attacked the top of his enemy's head, only to be cleared away by the longsword. A shadow again.

Shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow, shadow...

Over and over, the longsword slashed through Shikamaru. No matter how Gengo slashed and chopped, however, Shikamaru turned into a shadow and vanished into thin air.

"Where have you gone to, Shikamaru?!" Another Shikamaru disappeared from Gengo's eyes.

Behind you... His enemy didn't notice Shikamaru sneaking up on him.

"Checkmate."

The look on his face changing at the murmured word, Gengo whirled around.

Too late.

The shadow stretching out from Shikamaru's feet was already entwined with Gengo's body.

Producing countless shadow doppelgängers, he had used Ro's power to color them all with rich chakra. Gengo's brain gradually came to remember this as the nature of Shikamaru's doppelgänger's chakra. As he cut them down one after another, Gengo had begun to unconsciously chase after the chakra emitted by the doppelgängers. Once he had Gengo chasing this chakra, the real Shikamaru took the rear and used Ro's power once more to erase all of that chakra. When he leapt out from a total blind spot, Gengo had no idea what was happening until he was hit by Suffocating Darkness.

"Shikamaruuuuuu!"

Body bound, Gengo exhausted every ounce of strength he had to turn his head toward his captor and spit out his name with violent malice—his long tongue, shining slippery and red, peeped out.

“Hinoko!” Shikamaru shouted.

“Gaaaah! I keep, like, telling you not to use my naaaaame!” With an ear-splitting shriek, Soku released chakra from the index finger of her right hand.

Shikamaru watched as a bolt of orange lightning precisely caught and pierced Gengo’s tongue.

“Kah? Kaaah?” Thrusting his head up high, Gengo spluttered nothing but dry air.

“The chakra flowing to your tongue’s been cut off. Your body’s no longer able to spit out any words.”

Tears trailed down Gengo’s cheeks.

“I’m definitely going to build a world without war. So forgive me for stealing your dream.” As Shikamaru spoke, he sent Ro a signal with his eyes.

Indomitable as ever despite the torture and the genjutsu he had been subjected to, the big-boned man ran over, his shoulders rising and falling in an exaggerated gesture.

“Lock him up and take him to the alliance.”

“Yes sir, Lord Shikamaru.” Ro nodded, eyes glittering. His gaze was filled with admiration.

Trying to hide his embarrassment, Shikamaru pinched the tip of his nose between the tips of his fingers and then pointed at Gengo. As the Suffocating Darkness jutsu was released, Ro restrained Gengo’s arms with handcuffs specially made for the Anbu, with several layers of metal rings and talismans.

Before he knew it, Soku was standing behind Ro.

“Mission complete, huh? A little clumsy, but still...”

At Shikamaru’s slight embarrassed grin, their faces crumpled almost into tears, and they nodded.

4

By the time Shikamaru arrived in the great hall with his companions after descending the spiral staircase Gengo in tow, the clash between the revolutionaries and the shinobi was over. The moment Soku had severed the chakra in Gengo's tongue, the genjutsu cast on the revolutionaries had also been released, which had apparently been immensely helpful in ending the fighting.

Despite the fierceness of the battle, there were fewer injuries than he would have expected for revolutionaries and ninja alike. Excluding a few critically wounded fighters, everyone had gotten away with scrapes and bruises. It would have been a miracle that no one had died, except this was actually the result of the Sunagakure ninja faithfully carrying out Gaara's order to avoid killing wherever possible.

Learning of Gengo's capture, his close aides let their shoulders sag, the will to fight draining from them. It was as though they had woken up from a fever dream and surrendered themselves to a tremendous despair. All over the great hall, ninja from Konohagakure and Sunagakure were restraining demoralized revolutionaries and attending to their wounds.

"Sai!" Shikamaru spotted his comrade in a group being cared for by ninja.

"Shikamaru..." Pulling himself up onto his elbows, Sai stared at Shikamaru with empty eyes.

Ino had filled Shikamaru in on the events of the great hall after he left as they came down the spiral staircase.

"Sorry." Sai appeared to still be floating along in a half trance, perhaps the effect of being yanked out of the genjutsu through rather forceful methods.

"Don't worry about it. It's all over now," Shikamaru said gently, as he crouched down to touch Sai's shoulder. The supple muscle shuddered slightly, but Sai shed no tears. His heart was crying instead.

"I'm pathetic."

"There was magic in his words. I mean, I almost fell into them myself. There's

nothing to be ashamed of.”

“But—”

“Don’t worry about it too much. You always take things in stride, never get too worked up about stuff. It’s one of your good points.”

“Thanks, Shikamaru.” A single tear spilled out of the corner of Sai’s wide-open eye.

“Go back to Konoha and rest a little. I’ll talk to Kakashi.”

“Thanks,” Sai said, and lowered his head.

Ino was standing to one side.

“Take care of him,” Shikamaru told her and stood up.

Ino closed her eyes and nodded heavily, before crouching down beside Sai as if trading places with Shikamaru.

Just as he heaved a sigh of relief, a powerful voice slammed into Shikamaru from behind.

“Shi! Ka! Ma! Ruuuuuuuu!”

Right. I totally forgot about this guy... Scratching his head, he turned toward the voice.

A fist filled his field of view.

His body shuddered.

Tumbled.

Floor, ceiling, floor, ceiling—the scene changed at a dizzy pace.

Six turns...

Even as this powerful force toyed freely with his body, Shikamaru calmly counted the number of times he spun around.

His backside hit the floor, and his body came to an awkward stop. As he sat there, the figure of the person who had swooped down on him leapt into view. He jumped onto Shikamaru like he was riding a horse, while Shikamaru planted his hands on the ground and tried to push himself up.

Hands grabbed at his collar and started shaking him violently, jerking his head back and forth and back and forth.

“You!” the man roared. “Why! Me! Just you! Always! Do this! Everyone! Worried! I mean, me! Gaaaah! You idiot!”

“Sorry, Naruto.”

“You seriously are a giant idiot!”

Desperately stringing choppy words together, Naruto tried to communicate his feelings. And the feelings he had toward Shikamaru hidden in those indistinct word-barks came through loud and clear. The fire that burned deep within Naruto’s heart made Shikamaru realize all over again how perfect he was as the leader of Konoha, a village crowned by fire.

“You’re supposed to be my officer, aren’t you?” Apparently, the apology and seeing Shikamaru safe had calmed Naruto down a great deal. “Anyway, this country’s all right now,” he declared, forcefully.

At some point, Sakura had come to stand behind him. “The ruling class here, these revolutionaries, are former ninja, so they all know Naruto, the hero of the last Great War. Once they learned he was here, there wasn’t a single person willing to go up against him. And then Gengo was captured, and they woke up from the genjutsu, so everything should be contained pretty quickly.”

The effect of Naruto on the world of ninja was boundless. Just as Sakura said, once they heard Naruto was there, the revolutionaries wouldn’t have gone up against him.

“Next time something happens, you come straight to me and tell me, got it?”

“Yeah.” Shikamaru lowered his eyes and nodded obediently.

Naruto took his hands off his collar and stood up. “C’mon.”

A strong hand was thrust out.

He grabbed it wordlessly.

With incredible force, Shikamaru’s arm was yanked upward, and he was back on his feet in an instant. Shikamaru envied this direct way of doing things Naruto had, straightforward to the point of being overbearing. And it made him

think, *If it's for this man...*

"This is the end," Shikamaru muttered.

"Huh?" Naruto cocked his head to one side.

He jabbed at Naruto's chest with his fist. "This is the end of you acting like a kid."

"Yeah."

"You got some babysitting of your own in your future."

"Who's this kid we're talking about?"

"You know, don't you?"

They smiled quietly at each other.

∞

They decided to first return to Konohagakure to treat Sai and the two members of the Anbu. Shikamaru left Naruto and Sakura and the others to finish up in the Land of Silence. He could relax with Naruto in charge there. At any rate, as long as Gengo was now out of the picture, the rest would work itself out.

Some of the Sunagakure ninja also stayed, while the rest returned to their village. Once they left Tobari, they would all be traveling separate paths.

"I owe you one for this," Shikamaru said to Gaara, standing in front of the large village gates.

The sand ninja returning to their village were lined up behind their leader, powerful faces sculpted by the desolation of the desert. All were smiling at Shikamaru; it was one of those tiny, everyday moments that made him feel like the world of the ninja had really started to become one.

"No worries. We still need you in the alliance. Don't be so stiff, with all this talk of 'owing' and standing on ceremony. We're friends, and friends would help each other out," Gaara said, arms crossed. The Kazekage hadn't always been such a garrulous man. He had been dangerous, oozing bloodlust, a face like a Noh mask no one could read any emotion in. And onto this man's lips

slipped the same gentle smile as the ninja of Sunagakure.

Behind Shikamaru were Sai, Soku, and Ro. And Ino and Choji. The ninja returning to Konoha were also lined up there. They all watched over the exchange with gentle looks.

“But I’m so glad,” Gaara murmured with feeling. “If my sister hadn’t been agonizing over it, we would have lost an important man.”

Next to Gaara, Temari looked up and off to the side and acted like she hadn’t heard anything. She was likely intending to hide her embarrassment, but the move lacked charm.

“Don’t worry about Gengo. We’ll bring him to alliance headquarters on our way home.”

“I’m in your debt in more ways than one.”

“And I told you not to stand on formality like that,” the Kazekage, who was tremendously popular with the ninja of the village, said, offering his hand. “Well, we’ll meet again at the alliance.”

Shikamaru also extended his hand. He firmly clasped Gaara’s, filled with such warmth it was almost hot. Gaara squeezed back just as firmly. “See you then.”

“Mm-hmm.” Releasing Shikamaru’s hand, Gaara turned and looked at his companions. “We’re going home.”

“Ooh-rah!” The ninja of Sunagakure raised their voices like a secret battle cry.

Shikamaru called out to Temari as she was turning away, so unconsciously it surprised even him.

Temari stopped where she was. The other Sunagakure ninja moved to stop as well, but once they saw that Gaara was signaling them to keep going, they began racing along the main street that stretched out from the gates. Tossing a look in Shikamaru’s direction, Gaara followed after them.

Leaving only Temari.

“Eee!” Shikamaru heard a high-pitched voice behind him. It was Soku.

Ignoring her, Shikamaru approached Temari.

“What?” Temari asked, with a sour look. Her eyes were terrifying.

After taking a deep breath, as if to bolster his spirits now that he was losing his nerve, Shikamaru tried to say what he was thinking. “All this...”

It was no use. He couldn’t say it.

“What?” Temari pressed, annoyed. Her body was still turned the slightest bit toward the main road behind her, as if she were trying to chase after her little brother.

“Thanks for all this.”

“Hmph!” Temari laughed through her nose, but Shikamaru continued, undaunted.

“How about we have dinner or something sometime?”

“What? You asking me out on a date?” Temari asked, tone casual but eyes deadly serious. She didn’t have a molecule of shame; she was completely unendearing.

Why am I asking a woman like this to dinner? Shikamaru asked himself.

“Yeah, I guess that’s the gist of it,” he said, without thinking.

But he had asked, and that was that. Or rather, he had called out to stop her because he wanted to ask her. Feelings he himself didn’t understand threw Shikamaru into confusion.

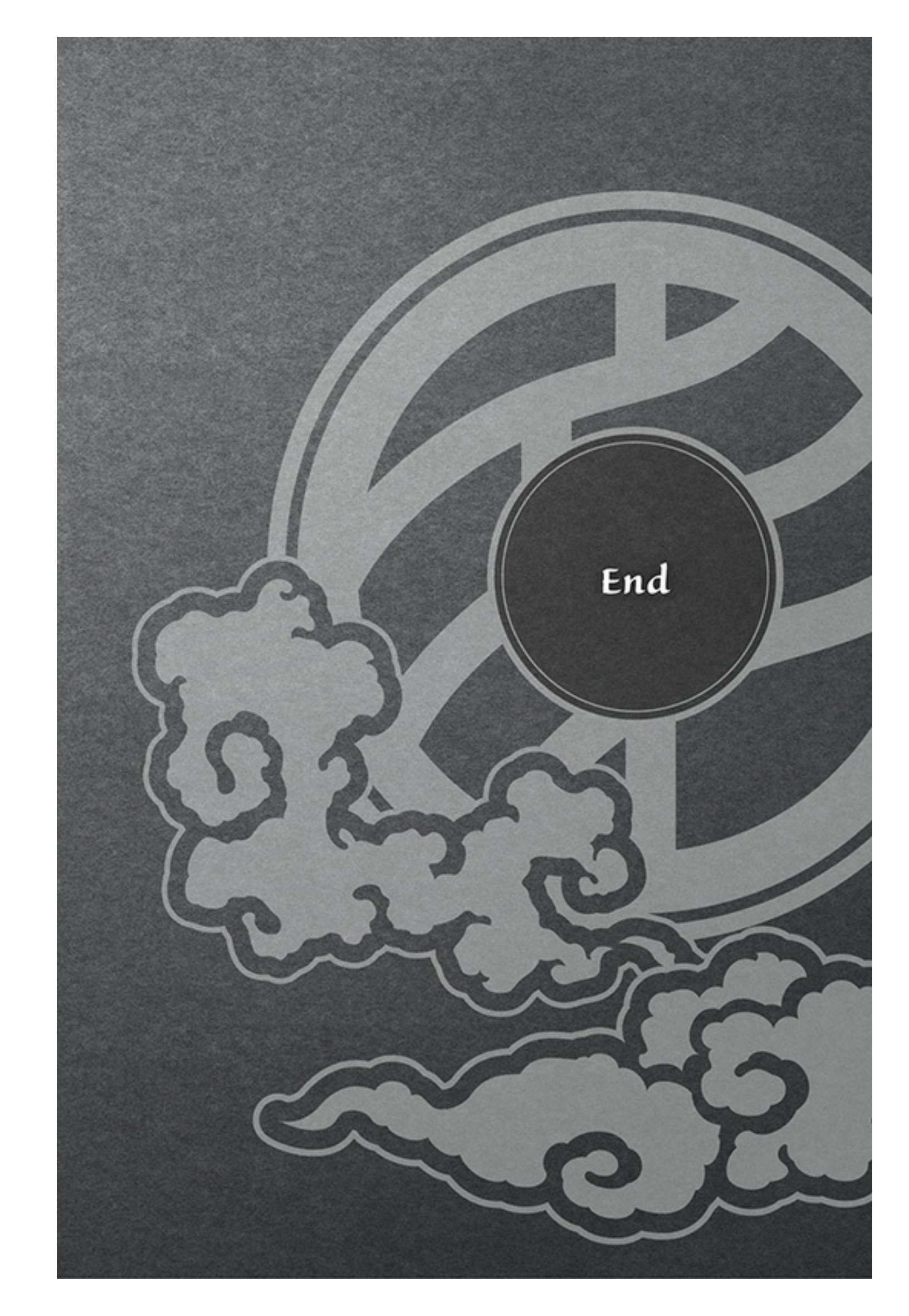
“A date, huh...?”

Almost as if she were sitting on a war council before a problematic enemy, Temari put a hand on her chin and gave the matter serious consideration.

“You don’t want to?” he asked, abruptly.

She stared fixedly at his face for a while before taking her hand off her chin and placing it on her hip. “What a draaaag,” she said.

The full smile she turned on him then was something very precious to Shikamaru.



End

End

It had been a week since they left the Land of Silence. At Kakashi's discretion, with the idea that he should recover from his confinement in Fushu Castle and his exhaustion after the battle with Gengo, Shikamaru had been ordered to take a break. But Sakura had healed the wound on his forehead soon after the battle, and he didn't actually have any bodily injuries that would require him to take time off. And his heart was actually lighter than it had been before he went to the Land of Silence. He had no particular need for time off, but Kakashi had told him to rest in no uncertain terms, and so he was resting, given that he had no other choice.

Choji and Ino and the others had gone out on another mission not long after their return to Konoha, and Naruto and Sakura were still in the Land of Silence. He did go over to Master Kurenai's house to visit Mirai, but a few hours' conversation was more than sufficient.

Which meant he had all this time alone with nothing to actually do.

A whole week with no one disturbing him.

For the first time in a long time, his days were quiet.

Sometimes, he spent the entire day staring at a shogi board and moving the pieces by himself; other times, he left the village and went mountain climbing or stared up at the clouds endlessly from the moment the sun climbed up into the sky until the sky was dyed with dusk. He enjoyed every minute of it almost more than he could stand.

He keenly felt the change in himself.

The Shikamaru from before the Land of Silence would certainly have panicked at being away from missions and his work with the alliance for a whole week. He would have been thinking about all sorts of ridiculous things, like whether or not some big thing was happening while he was away, or what if someone made some critical mistake; he wouldn't have been able to have even a single satisfying day off.

But now, he had relaxed almost too much. This week, about the only time he

remembered missions or the alliance was during the ten minutes in his futon before he fell asleep.

Even if he wasn't there, his comrades would get the job done for him. He had naturally started thinking like this. It wasn't as though his sense of responsibility had disappeared. It was just that he had created some wiggle room for himself. If there was a situation where he was actually needed, Kakashi or Temari would call him. And he could switch gears in that moment and still handle any situation more than capably. There was no need to spend his time off thinking about rushing headlong into work.

Precisely because he trusted his comrades, he was able to switch gears so completely. But he had been driving himself so hard that he had stopped understanding this very simple fact.

Over his weeklong vacation, he could objectively observe—to the point of unpleasantness—just how himself before the Land of Silence and himself after were different. He came to see how important his comrades were, along with his own small-mindedness and arrogant, mistaken pride in trying to shoulder the burden of anything and everything all by himself.

A person couldn't live alone. He wasn't so almighty he could master everything all by himself.

Which was why he had friends.

The very idea of trying to take on the burden alone had been a mistake. And if only to learn this lesson, his trip to the Land of Silence had been a worthwhile one.

When he had very nearly been swayed by Gengo at Fushu Castle, a single hit from Temari had blown everything away. He had seen in that storm the clear answer to the question of who he was.

Basically, Shikamaru was an irresponsible man. Everything was a hassle, and the truth was, he didn't want to do any of it. If he could have just spaced out, he would have gladly stepped back and bowed out for several days.

That was the real Shikamaru.

And that was all right.

Because he acknowledged this irresponsible, happy-go-lucky self, there were things he could do.

Only someone like him could understand the feelings of those who longed for ordinary lives without dreams. What was wrong with being happy with just right? Dreams weren't all about aiming for the sky, for some lofty goal or objective.

In a world where war continued, this dream was maybe a difficult one.

And that's why there was meaning in his being there.

If this world were at peace, if it became a world where everyone could live a quiet life, then those people wishing for a just-right life would get that just-right life. Unfortunately, Shikamaru had been born into a world of war. And so he lived this busy life.

For the sake of the people who would be born in the future, he had to end these wars. This dream didn't spring from any lofty ideals like Gengo's. Nor was it anything as noble as ambition or will.

A world in which everyone could live lazy lives...

For someone trying to build such a world, it was a bit like putting the cart before the horse to work frantically to make it happen.

Do work that was just right.

That was enough.

∞

"Seriously. Thanks for all your hard work on this one," Kakashi said, as he tapped a sheaf of paper against his desk.

Shikamaru had reported to the Hokage's office to be debriefed on the Land of Silence incident.

"I got the overall picture from the current reports from Sakura, who's still on the ground there, and from the mission completion reports from Ino and the others. I also heard about your hard work from Soku and Ro, who are getting medical treatment."

“My...hard work?” The ends of his eyebrows naturally twitched up into an embarrassed expression.

Unable to see through Gengo’s genjutsu, he had been caught up in it, and only when Temari came along and saved him had he been able to wake up; he had been rescued by his comrades, right up until the end. He hadn’t accomplished a single thing by himself.

“Although you really didn’t have to write such a detailed report during your holiday...” Kakashi’s eyes dropped to the mountain of papers in his hand, a bundle of nearly fifty pages. The papers he had been neatening up before were the report Shikamaru had written.

In the end, it had been the present-tense missions and alliance he hadn’t thought about during his break; the incident in the Land of Silence was different. Summarizing everything into a report was one of the duties of a shinobi, and it was only natural that he would do this much during his break. That said, it had been light work, only about an hour a day.

“I’ll look it over.” With a sigh, Kakashi placed the report on top of the mountain of papers on the edge of his desk. And the mountain stretched closer to the sky.

Without a glance at the unsteady pile of paper, Kakashi turned his gaze on Shikamaru. “You’re someone we really need both here and in the alliance. You need to take better care of yourself, okay?”

Someone we really need...

“What a drag.” The words spilled from his lips automatically.

“You’re all right now, huh?” Kakashi laughed, staring fixedly at Shikamaru’s face.

“Yeah.” Shikamaru laughed too.

“Okay then.” The Hokage placed his hand on the back of his neck and shook his head several times before slipping his other hand into a desk drawer. He pulled out a document of some kind and offered it to Shikamaru.

Shikamaru took it and dropped his eyes onto the page. It laid out the details

of a mission stamped with a red B-rank mark: Follow and act as guard to a retainer of the daimyo of the Land of Fire to deliver a sovereign message to the Land of Lightning.

Thanks to the impact of the new connections between ninja forged by the alliance, public safety was greatly improved, and traveling back and forth between two countries was markedly easier than it had been in the past. The daimyo's attendants alone were basically sufficient, but several ninja were attached to the party in case of anything unexpected. It was a case that could be satisfactorily handled by any ninja at the chunin level or higher and didn't especially require Shikamaru.

"It's a mission that's too easy for you, but—"

"Kakashi, can I say something?" Shikamaru said, cutting the Hokage off with his right hand.

Kakashi stared at him with a surprised look. "It's been a while since you called me Kakashi. You kind of threw me there."

"I decided to quit twisting myself up into some ideal, worrying about form and appearance all the time."

"Glad to hear it." Kakashi nodded, and Shikamaru returned to the issue at hand.

"About this mission, could you give it to someone else?"

"Why?"

"Oh, it's just that the day after tomorrow..." Averting his eyes, Shikamaru's cheeks took on a red hue. Cocking his head to one side, Kakashi waited for Shikamaru to continue. "I have a date."

"Pft!" Kakashi erupted, and Shikamaru glared. "I'm just surprised. I never thought you'd refuse a mission for a date. But that's great! You go and enjoy."

"Thank you."

"That thing called youth, huh?" Kakashi closed his eyes and crossed his arms, nodded several times.

He'd given up on a just-right life. So he deserved this much at least. "Well, I'll

excuse myself then.” He turned his back to Kakashi and set his right foot forward, moving to leave the room.

“Shikamaru.”

When he turned around again, Kakashi was standing up. “I figured maybe the current you might understand a bit better. Can I ask you one more time? What does it mean to be an adult?”

Turning his eyes up to the ceiling, Shikamaru thought about it for a while. And then he let the words that popped into his head come out as is. Honest. “Giving up on something and finding something more important... Maybe something like that. Although I’m not totally sure.”

“Giving up on something and finding something more important, hm?”

“Some guys are like Naruto; they’re totally focused on one thing from the time they’re kids. But most guys are lost and they give up on a thing, but they still keep on walking, and then finally, they find something important, and maybe they live toward that.”

“Makes sense.” Kakashi crossed his arms and lowered his eyes.

“Okay then. I’ll be on my way,” Shikamaru said, turning around, too embarrassed to stay there any longer.

“Go and have fun, Shikamaru!” The instant he closed the door, he heard Kakashi’s bright voice.

“Thank you,” Shikamaru said, words that wouldn’t reach the Hokage.

∞

Get everyone on board and the time flows gently...

Does he look like me?

The baby was crying languidly, as though he had seen through everything in this world, even though he had only just been born into it.

“It’s okay. There’ll be a time when you realize you don’t know anything. You’ll make friends who’ll head toward that moment with you.”

The baby, who of course couldn’t understand anything I said, stared at me,

opening wide, single-lidded almond eyes—his mother’s eyes.

“Guess I can’t say ‘what a drag’ or anything anymore.”

“You can a bit. Just don’t get crazy with it. And before you really stop moving, I’ll yank on your cheek again and send you flying.”

“Oh, yeah, right.”

What should we call him?

“What a drag.”

MASASHI KISHIMOTO

Author/artist Masashi Kishimoto was born in 1974 in rural Okayama Prefecture, Japan. Like many kids, he was first inspired to become a manga artist in elementary school when he read *Dragon Ball* by Akira Toriyama. After spending time in art college, he won the Hop Step Award for new manga artists with his story *Karakuri*. After considering various genres for his next project, Kishimoto decided on a story steeped in traditional Japanese culture. His first version of *Naruto*, drawn in 1997, was a one-shot story about fox spirits; his final version, which debuted in *Weekly Shonen Jump* in 1999, quickly became the most popular ninja manga in the world. The series would also spawn multiple anime series, movies, novels, video games and more. Having concluded the series in late 2014, Masashi Kishimoto has kept himself busy this year with the sidestory *Naruto: The Seventh Hokage and the Scarlet Spring* and writing the story for the latest Naruto movie, *Boruto: Naruto the Movie* both of which will focus on the title character's son, Boruto.

TAKASHI YANO

Takashi Yano won the *Shosetsu Subaru* Newcomer Award in 2008 with *Jashu*. He has published a number of works since then as an expert on period dramas. He is also active in a number of other places, including writing the story for the *Assassin's Creed 4* manga.

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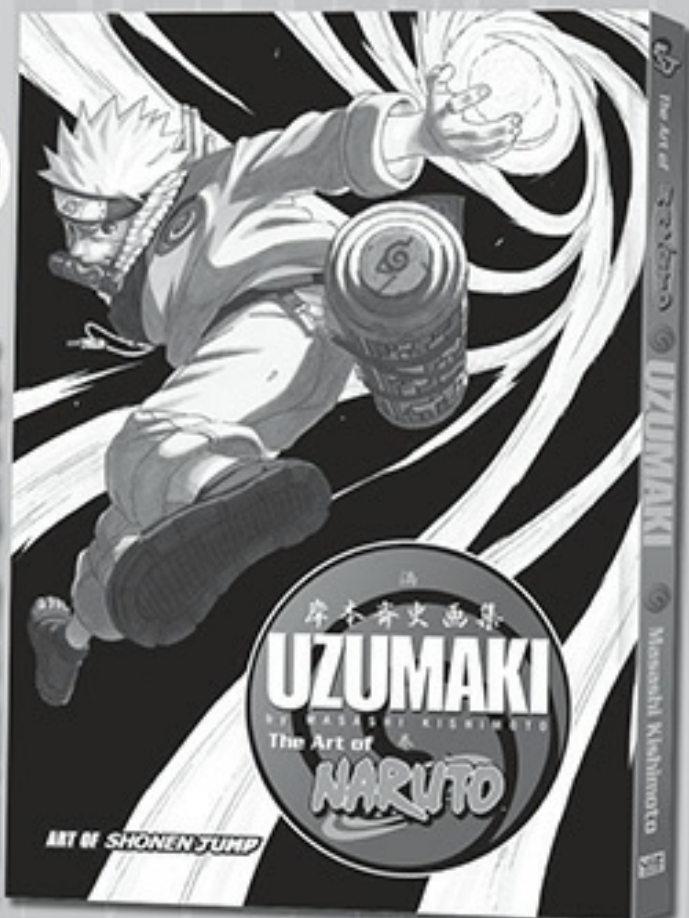
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